



THE 2018 JOHN BREAUX SYMPOSIUM

AN ANATOMY OF

**FAKE
NEWS**

**HISTORY, POPULISM, PARTISANSHIP,
TECHNOLOGY, AND SOLUTIONS**

LSU

Manship School of
Mass Communication
Reilly Center For
Media & Public Affairs

The Graduate School
of Political Management

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

AN ANATOMY OF 'FAKE NEWS'

***HISTORY, POPULISM, PARTISANSHIP,
TECHNOLOGY, AND SOLUTIONS***

The 2018 John Breaux Symposium



**Manship School of
Mass Communication
Reilly Center For
Media & Public Affairs**

**The Graduate School
of Political Management**

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

ABOUT THE 2018 JOHN BREAUX SYMPOSIUM

The 2018 Breaux Symposium—*An Anatomy of ‘Fake News’*—was sponsored by the Reilly Center for Media & Public Affairs at the Louisiana State University Manship School of Mass Communication and the Graduate School of Political Management (GSPM) at George Washington University. The event brought together scholars and news experts in the nation’s capital to discuss the pervasive problem of fake news, by focusing on 1) the historical antecedents, 2) anti-establishment populism, 3) the role of political parties and mediating institutions, 4) technological enablement and amelioration, and 5) solutions to these pressing issues.

The annual Breaux Symposium was established in 2000 as a core program of the Reilly Center for Media & Public Affairs, which is part of the LSU Manship School of Mass Communication. The goal of the Breaux Symposium is to push the boundaries of debate around an aspect of media, politics, and public policy.

The Reilly Center for Media & Public Affairs

The Reilly Center for Media & Public Affairs is partnership-driven, action-oriented, and dedicated to exploring contemporary issues at the intersection of mass communication and public life. Its interdisciplinary approach draws together experts from diverse fields to advance research and dialogue. The intent is to inspire our communities to think deeply, broaden knowledge, develop solutions, and take action. Underlying the Center's endeavors is to strengthen and advance the Manship School's national and state leadership in media and politics.

The Manship School of Mass Communication at Louisiana State University

The LSU Manship School of Mass Communication ranks among the strongest collegiate communication programs in the country, with its robust emphasis on media and public affairs. It offers undergraduate degrees in public relations, journalism, political communication, digital advertising, and pre-law, along with four graduate degree programs: master of mass communication, PhD in media and public affairs, certificate of strategic communication, and dual MMC/law degree.

The Graduate School of Political Management at George Washington University

Founded in 1987 and located in the heart of Washington, D.C., GW's Graduate School of Political Management is the first and foremost school of applied politics and advocacy, offering master's degrees in the disciplines of legislative affairs, political management, and strategic public relations. Additionally, GSPM offers a political communications and strategic governance master's degree in Spanish. The GSPM provides our graduate students with an education that combines political science knowledge with real-world best practices. The school seeks to advance the public's understanding of the processes involved in democratic politics and trains future political leaders to wield representative power responsibly, with ethics, integrity, and professionalism. Daily, our students, alumni, and faculty engage in public service through their work in politics, communications, and advocacy.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 5 **Author and Discussant Biographies**
- 15 **Introduction** by John Maxwell Hamilton and Lara M. Brown
- 19 **Chapter 1: History and Fake News**
- ☰ John Maxwell Hamilton and Heidi J. S. Tworek, “Fake News: A Brief Modern History”
 - ☞ Tom Rosenstiel response, “Fake News and the Usable Past”
 - ☪ Discussion on the history of fake news
- 33 **Chapter 2: Populism and Fake News**
- ☰ Jay Cost, “Populism in America, Then and Now”
 - ☞ Sidney Milkis response, “The Constitutional Roots of Fake News”
 - ☪ Discussion on the role of populism and fake news
- 51 **Chapter 3: Political Parties and Fake News**
- ☰ Elaine C. Kamarck, “What’s Wrong with America’s Political Parties? The Presence of Primaries, and the Absence of ‘Pork,’ Party Money, and Privacy”
 - ☞ David Karol response, “‘Fake News’ and Party Reform”
 - ☪ Discussion on political parties, partisanship, and fake news
- 67 **Chapter 4: Technology and Fake News**
- ☰ Ryan Thornburg, “The Psychology and Economics of Fake News on Social Media”
 - ☞ David Karpf response, “This Time, It’s Business: The New Trouble with Fake News”
 - ☪ Discussion on technology and fake news
- 85 **Chapter 5: Solutions to Fake News**
- ☰ Leonard M. Apcar, “Media Manipulation and the Challenge of Fake News”
 - ☰ Paul Mihailidis, “Considerations for Responding to Fake News”
 - ☰ Michael Cornfield, “Trump, Twitter, and ‘Fake News’ as a Rhetorical Device”
 - ☪ Discussion on solutions to fake news
- 113 **Conclusion**
- ☰ Tim Klein (editor), “The Linguistic Haze of ‘Fake News’ and Possible Paths Forward”



Leonard M. Apcar

Wendell Gray Switzer Jr. Endowed Chair in Media Literacy,
Professional in Residence, LSU Manship School of Mass Communication

Len Apcar holds the Wendell Gray Switzer Jr. Endowed Chair in Media Literacy, is a fellow at the Reilly Center for Media & Public Affairs and a Professional-in-Residence, where he teaches courses on media literacy, including media manipulation and fake news. Apcar has also been a Visiting Professor at the University of Hong Kong where he taught digital media courses.

In a nearly 40-year professional career at *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*, he has been a reporter, online editor, Washington editor, and Asia editor. During his time as editor of nytimes.com, the site won virtually every major online award for news, opinion, and photography.

As chief Asia editor based in Hong Kong he helped create a 24-hour global newsroom for online and print. At *The Wall Street Journal* he was a reporter in Detroit, Washington, and Dallas.

He holds an MS from Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism and a BA in political science from Claremont McKenna College in California.



Lara M. Brown, Ph.D.

Director, Graduate School of Political Management,
George Washington University

A distinguished writer and dedicated scholar, Lara Brown is the author of *Jockeying for the American Presidency: The Political Opportunism of Aspirants*, the first systematic study of presidential aspirants from the 1790s through 2008. She co-edited and contributed to *The Presidential Leadership Dilemma: Between the Constitution and a Political Party* and *Campaigning for President 2016: Strategy and Tactics*. She has also authored several book chapters in other scholarly volumes, such as *The Presidency and the Political System* and *Hatred of American Presidents: Personal Attacks on the White House from Washington to Trump*.

Her current research project (working book title: *Mirror Images: The Gilded Age, the Global Age, and Federalism's Revival*) is a comparative historical undertaking, which argues that America is presently undergoing a tumultuous period similar to what the country experienced during the Gilded Age.

Prior to coming to George Washington University, Brown served as an assistant professor in the Department of Political Science at Villanova University. Before returning to academia in 2004, she worked as an education policy consultant in Silicon Valley and Los Angeles. Brown also served as a political appointee in President William J. Clinton's administration at the U.S. Department of Education.

Born and raised in California, Brown earned her BA, MA, and PhD in political science from the University of California, Los Angeles. She also earned a MA in American politics and public policy from the University of Arizona.



Michael Cornfield, Ph.D.

Associate Professor, GWU Graduate School of Political Management & Research
Director of the Global Center for Political Management

Michael Cornfield directs the PEORIA (Public Echoes Of Rhetoric in America) Project, a research initiative developing qualitative and quantitative methods to extract political intelligence from social media data.

He teaches the introductory course in George Washington University's Political Management Program, Fundamentals of Political Management, and supervises the program's thesis and independent study courses.

Cornfield is the author of two books, *Politics Moves Online: Campaigning and the Internet* and *The Civic Web: Online Politics and Democratic Values*, co-edited with David M. Anderson. His examination of the impact of Twitter on the first GOP debate in August 2015 will appear in the book *Social Media, Political Marketing and the 2016 US Election*.

Cornfield received his BA from Pomona College and his PhD from Harvard University. Before coming to George Washington University, he taught at the University of Virginia and the College of William and Mary. Cornfield also served as a Senior Research Consultant to the Pew Internet & American Life Project.



Jay Cost, Ph.D.

Contributing Editor, *The Weekly Standard*

Jay Cost serves as a contributing editor to *The Weekly Standard* and a columnist for the *National Review Online* and the *Pittsburgh Post Gazette*. He is the author of three books, most recently *The Price of Greatness: James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and the Creation of American Oligarchy*. He holds a PhD in political science from the University of Chicago. He lives in western Pennsylvania with his wife and two children.



Matthew Dallek, Ph.D.

Political Historian & Associate Professor,
George Washington University Graduate School of Political Management

Matthew Dallek, an associate professor at George Washington University's Graduate School of Political Management, is a political historian whose intellectual interests include the intersection of social crises and political transformation, the evolution of the modern conservative movement, and liberalism and its critics. Dallek has authored or co-authored three books including, most recently, *Defenseless Under the Night: The Roosevelt Years and the Origins of Homeland Security*, which won the Henry Adams prize from the Society for History in the Federal Government; *The Right Moment: Ronald Reagan's First Victory and the Decisive Turning Point in American Politics*, which appeared on *The Washington Post* and *The Chicago Tribune's* annual best-of lists; and *Inside Campaigns: Elections through the Eyes of Political Professionals*, which the American Library Association's *Choice* magazine selected as one of its 2016 "outstanding academic titles."

Dallek is a frequent commentator in the national news media on politics, history, and public affairs. His articles and reviews have appeared in *The Washington Post*, *Politico*, *The Atlantic*, *Perspectives*, *The Journal of Policy History*, and numerous other scholarly and popular publications, and his commentary has been heard on *NPR*, *CNN International*, and *MSNBC*.

Dallek earned a BA in history from the University of California, Berkeley and a PhD in history from Columbia University. Prior to joining George Washington University, he served as an associate director of the University of California Washington Center. He also worked as a speechwriter for House Minority Leader Richard A. Gephardt. Born and raised in Los Angeles, Dallek lives in Washington with his wife and two sons.



John Maxwell Hamilton, Ph.D.

Hopkins P. Breazeale Professor, LSU Manship School of Mass Communication & Global Fellow, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, D.C.

As a professional journalist Jack Hamilton reported at home and abroad for *The Milwaukee Journal*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, and *ABC* radio. He was a longtime commentator for *Marketplace*, broadcast nationally by *Public Radio International*. His work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Foreign Affairs*, and *The Nation*, among other publications. In the 1980s, the *National Journal* said Hamilton has shaped public opinion about the complexity of U.S.-Third World relations “more than any other single journalist.”

In government, Hamilton oversaw nuclear non-proliferation issues for the House Foreign Affairs Committee, served in the State Department during the Carter administration as an advisor to the head of the U.S. foreign aid program in Asia, and managed a World Bank program to educate Americans about economic development. He served in Vietnam as a Marine Corps platoon commander and in Okinawa as a reconnaissance company commander.

At LSU, Hamilton was founding dean of the Manship School of Mass Communication and executive vice-chancellor and provost. Hamilton received the Freedom Forum’s Administrator of the Year Award in 2003.

Hamilton is author or co-author of six books. His most recent, *Journalism’s Roving Eye: A History of American Newsgathering Abroad*, won the Goldsmith Prize, among other awards. He earned his bachelor’s and master’s degrees in journalism from Marquette and Boston Universities respectively, and a doctorate in American Civilization from George Washington University.



Elaine C. Kamarck, Ph.D.

Director, Center for Effective Public Management, Brookings Institution

Elaine Kamarck is a Senior Fellow in the Governance Studies program as well as the Director of the Center for Effective Public Management at the Brookings Institution. She is an expert on American electoral politics and government innovation and reform in the United States, OECD nations, and developing countries. She focuses her research on the presidential nomination system and American politics and has worked in many American presidential

campaigns. Kamarck is the author of *Primary Politics: Everything You Need to Know about How America Nominates Its Presidential Candidates and Why Presidents Fail And How They Can Succeed Again*.



David Karol, Ph.D.

Associate Professor, University of Maryland

David Karol studies parties, interest groups, political institutions, and American political development. Before coming to the University of Maryland, he taught at American University, UC Berkeley and the UC Washington Center and was a Visiting Scholar at the Center for the Study of Democratic Politics at Princeton University. He won the “Emerging Scholar” Award in 2010 from the Political Organizations and Parties Section of the American Political Science Association. In his book, *Party Position Change in American Politics: Coalition Management*, Karol explains key aspects of party position change: the speed of shifts, the stability of new positions, and the extent to which change occurs via adaptation by incumbents. He shows that these factors vary depending on whether parties are reacting to changed preferences of coalition components, incorporating new constituencies, or experimenting on “groupless” issues. Karol reveals that adaptation by incumbents is a far greater source of change than previously recognized. He is also a co-author of *The Party Decides: Presidential Nominations before and after Reform* and co-editor of *Nominating the President: Evolution and Revolution in 2008 and Beyond*. David Karol’s current research concerns the role of elite opinion in American politics, showing how it produces durable policy disagreements between congresses and presidents regardless of which party controls these institutions.

David Karol has served on the editorial board of *The Journal of Politics* and the Council of APSA’s section on Political Organizations and Parties and is an occasional contributor to *The Monkey Cage*, *The Washington Post’s* political science blog.

Karol holds a PhD from the University of California, Los Angeles, an MA from Iowa State University, and a BA from Grinnell College.



David Karpf, Ph.D.

Associate Professor,
George Washington University School of Media & Public Affairs

David Karpf is an associate professor in the School of Media and Public Affairs at George Washington University. His work focuses on strategic communication practices of political associations in America, with a particular interest in Internet-related strategies.

Karpf is the award-winning author of *The MoveOn Effect: The Unexpected Transformation of American Political Advocacy* and *Analytic Activism: Digital Listening and the New Political Strategy*. Both books discuss how digital media is transforming the work of political advocacy and activist organizations. His writing about digital media and politics has been published in a wide range of academic and journalistic outlets, including *The Nation*, *Nonprofit Quarterly*, and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

Prior to entering academia, Karpf was an environmental organizer with the Sierra Club. He served as National Director of the Sierra Student Coalition in 1999, National Trainings Director from 1998-2000, and National Roadless Campaign Coordinator in 2000. He also served six years on the Sierra Club's Board of Directors. Karpf weaves this practical campaign perspective into much of his research and teaching.

Karpf previously served as an assistant professor in the School of Communication and Information at Rutgers University. He was a resident fellow at the University of Virginia's Miller Center for Public Affairs, a postdoctoral fellow at Brown University's Taubman Center for Public Policy, and a visiting fellow at Yale University's Information Society Project. His work has appeared in the *Journal of Information Technology and Politics*, *Policy & Internet*, *IEEE Intelligent Systems*, and *Information, Communication, and Society*. He has also been published in *The Guardian* and *TechPresident*, and is frequently quoted by mainstream publications on technology and politics.



Tim Klein (editor)

Doctoral Student, LSU Manship School of Mass Communication

Tim Klein is a PhD candidate at the Manship School of Mass Communication at Louisiana State University. Tim has worked in electoral politics, taught at the School of Journalism at Addis Ababa University in Ethiopia, and has produced and directed documentary films, including the feature length documentary on foreign aid in Africa, *What Are We Doing Here?* His current research focuses on media history and political theory, with an emphasis on the populist and progressive movements. He is also conducting research on press freedom in emerging democracies. In partnership with the U.S. Embassy in Ethiopia, Tim created the Ethiopian Journalism Exchange, which partners with five universities to facilitate educational collaborations between journalists and educators in Ethiopia and the U.S.



Paul Mihailidis, Ph.D.

Associate Professor, Department of Journalism, Emerson College

Paul Mihailidis is an associate professor of civic media and journalism in the school of communication at Emerson College in Boston, MA, where he teaches media literacy, civic media, and community activism. He is founding program director of the MA in Civic Media: Art & Practice, principle investigator of the Emerson Engagement Lab, and faculty chair and director of the Salzburg Academy on Media and Global Change. His research focuses on the nexus of media, education, and civic voices.

His newest books, *Civic Media Literacies*, *Civic Media: Technology, Design, Practice* (with Eric Gordon) and *Media Literacy and the Emerging Citizen* outline effective practices for participatory citizenship and engagement in digital culture. His work has been featured in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Slate Magazine*, *The Nieman Foundation*, *USA Today*, *CNN*, and others. He co-edits the *Journal of Media Literacy Education*, and sits on the advisory board for iCivics. He earned his PhD from the Phillip Merrill College of Journalism at the University of Maryland, College Park.



Sidney Milkis, Ph.D.

White Burkett Miller Professor, Department of Politics & Senior Fellow, Miller Center, University of Virginia

Sidney M. Milkis is the White Burkett Miller Professor of the Department of Politics and senior fellow at the Miller Center at the University of Virginia. During the 2006-2007 academic year, he was the John Winant Visiting Professor of American Government at Oxford University. His books include *The President and the Parties: The Transformation of the American Party System Since the New Deal*, *Political Parties and Constitutional Government: Remaking American Democracy*, *Presidential Greatness*, coauthored with Marc Landy, *The American Presidency: Origins and Development, 1776-2014*, 7th edition, coauthored with Michael Nelson, *Theodore Roosevelt, the Progressive Party, and the Transformation of American Democracy*, *The Politics of Major Policy Reform Since the Second World War*, co-edited with Jeffery Jenkins, and *Rivalry and Reform: Presidents, Social Movements and the Transformation of American Politics*, co-authored with Daniel Tichenor (forthcoming). His articles have been published in *Perspectives on Politics*, *Political Science Quarterly*, *Publius*, *The Journal of Policy History*, *Studies in American Political Development*, *The Anti-Trust Law Journal*, *American Political Thought*, and numerous edited volumes.



Tom Rosenstiel

Executive Director, American Press Institute

An author, journalist, researcher, and media critic, Tom Rosenstiel is one of the nation's most recognized thinkers on the future of media. Before joining the American Press Institute in January 2013, he was founder and for 16 years director of the Project for Excellence in Journalism at the Pew Research Center in Washington, D.C., and co-founder and vice chair of the Committee of Concerned Journalists.

He is the author of eight books, including his first novel, *Shining City*, about a supreme court nomination. His other books include *The Elements of Journalism: What News People Should Know and the Public Should Expect*, which has been translated into more than 25 languages and is used widely in journalism education. He is also co-author with Bill Kovach of the book *Blur: How to Know What's True in the Age of Information Overload*. His books and work at PEJ have generated more than 50,000 academic citations.

During his journalism career he worked as media writer for *The Los Angeles Times* for a decade, chief congressional correspondent for *Newsweek*, press critic for *MSNBC*, business editor of the *Peninsula Times Tribune*, a reporter for Jack Anderson's Washington Merry Go 'Round column, and began his career at the *Woodside Country Almanac* in his native northern California.

He earned the Goldsmith Book Award from Harvard, four Sigma Delta Chi Awards for Journalism Research from SPJ and four awards for national media criticism from Penn State. He has been named a fellow of the Society of Professional Journalists, the organization's highest honor, the Honor Medal for Distinguished Service in Journalism from the University of Missouri Journalism School, the Dewitt Carter Reddick Award for Outstanding Professional

Achievement in the Field of Communications from the University of Texas at Austin, and the Columbia Journalism School Distinguished Alumni Award.



Andrew Selee, Ph.D.

President, Migration Policy Institute

Andrew Selee became President of the Migration Policy Institute (MPI), a non-partisan think tank, in August 2017. MPI has offices in Washington, DC and Brussels, and conducts research on immigration and integration policies in the United States, Europe, and around the world.

Prior, Selee spent seventeen years at the Woodrow Wilson Center, where he started the Center's Mexico Institute and later served as Vice President for Programs and Executive Vice President.

In 2017, he was awarded the Andrew Carnegie Fellowship to finish his book *Vanishing Frontiers: The Forces Driving Mexico and the United States Together*. He is the author of *What Should Think Tanks Do? A Strategic Guide to Policy Impact* and several other books on Mexico, Latin America, and global issues.

He has been an adjunct professor at both George Washington University (Elliott School) and Johns Hopkins University (Advanced Academic Programs) and he has written extensively in the press.

He holds a PhD in Policy Studies from the University of Maryland, an MA in Latin American Studies from the University of California, San Diego, and a BA from Washington University in St. Louis.



Jenée Slocum, Ph.D.

Director, Reilly Center for Media & Public Affairs,
LSU Manship School of Mass Communication

Jenée Slocum is a public policy, communications, and higher education professional whose passion lies in bringing people and resources together to advance the public good. Throughout her nearly 20-year career, she has worked with government entities, individuals, and non-profit organizations. Slocum has helped her clients and employers build robust systemic structures that support long-term goals, overcome organizational challenges, and grow resilient coalitions to bolster a range of initiatives. She is most well-known for her ability to conceptualize and implement successful large-scale programs.

As the director of the Reilly Center for Media & Public Affairs at Louisiana State University's Manship School of Mass Communication, Slocum applies her extensive experience and enthusiasm for politics, public policy, and communications to building and shaping the strategic direction of the Center and leading outreach and engagement for the Manship School. She has more than quadrupled Reilly Center activities, including public engagement in media and policy forums, as well as powerful research into race and gender in communications and politics.

Slocum previously served as the agency higher education liaison for both Louisiana Economic Development and the Louisiana Workforce Commission. While in those roles, she successfully collaborated with Louisiana's higher education and PreK-12 community to adjust legislation and institutional policy

focusing state resources on and encouraging state residents to pursue programs leading to high-demand, high-wage job opportunities available in the state.

Nearly a quarter of her life was spent living abroad, which gives Jenée a unique cultural perspective that informs her ability to build strong relationships and support on behalf of her clients. She speaks three languages fluently, including Portuguese and Spanish, thanks to her time living in Honduras, Argentina, and Brazil.

Slocum is a 1999 graduate of LSU's Manship School, where she earned a degree in public relations. While at LSU, she served as student body president. She also holds a master's degree and PhD. in higher education and organizational change from The University of California, Los Angeles.



Cheryl W. Thompson

Associate Professor of Journalism, George Washington University School of Media & Public Affairs

Cheryl W. Thompson joined the George Washington School of Media and Public Affairs in 2013 from *The Washington Post*, where she has distinguished herself as an award-winning investigative journalist covering politics, crime, and corruption.

Her fearless reporting led to the prosecution and imprisonment of former Prince George's County (MD) executive Jack Johnson. Thompson has more than 25 years of newspaper reporting experience, including at *The Gainesville Sun* (Florida), the *Los Angeles Daily News*, the *Chicago Tribune* and *The Kansas City Star*. She arrived at *The Washington Post* in 1997, where she was a Metro Reporter and National Reporter before moving to the Investigative Unit. She also served as a White House Correspondent during part of President Obama's first term.

Thompson, who continues to do investigative projects for *The Washington Post*, did undergraduate and graduate work at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, and also has a certificate in Investigative Reporting from the Poynter Institute for Media Studies in St. Petersburg, Florida. She was an adjunct lecturer at Georgetown and Howard University and the University of Alaska-Fairbanks. Thompson has won numerous local, regional and national awards, including two Salute to Excellence awards from the National Association of Black Journalists for an examination of homicides in the nation's capital and the shooting death of a 14-year-old boy by a DC police officer over a stolen minibike.

She was part of *The Washington Post* team that reported on a year-long series on police-involved shooting that won the 2016 Pulitzer Prize for National Reporting. In 2002, Thompson was part of a team of *Washington Post* reporters awarded the Pulitzer Prize for National Reporting. She also is a 2011 recipient of an Emmy Award from the National Capital Chapter of the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, and the Freedom of Information Medal from Investigative Reporters and Editors.

She was elected vice president of the Investigative Reporters and Editors board of directors and also serves on the board at the Fund for Investigative

Journalism. She is a member of the National Association of Black Journalists and was named the 2017 NABJ Educator of the Year. Professor Thompson also won the GW Honey Nashman Spark a Life Award for Faculty Member of the Year in 2014.



Ryan Thornburg

Director of Reese News Lab, Reese Felts Distinguished Associate Professor, University of North Carolina

Ryan Thornburg is an associate professor in the School of Media & Journalism at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is director of the Reese News Lab and a part of the School's Center for Innovation & Sustainability in Local Media. Before joining the School in 2007, Thornburg spent a decade in leadership positions in online newsrooms, mostly working on national and international news at *The Washington Post*.



Heidi Tworek, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor of International History, University of British Columbia

Heidi Tworek is an Assistant Professor of International History at the University of British Columbia (UBC). She is a member of the Science and Technology Studies program, the Language Science Initiative, and the Institute for European Studies at UBC. She is a visiting fellow at the Joint Center for History and Economics at Harvard University. She is also a non-resident fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the United States and the Canadian Global Affairs Institute.

Tworek has authored over a dozen articles in journals for history and communications. She recently completed her first book, *News from Germany: The Competition to Control World Communications, 1900-1945*, published by Harvard University Press in 2019. She is also co-editor of two volumes, one on international organizations and the media, the other on the makers of global business. Her writing has been published in English and German in *Foreign Affairs*, *The Atlantic*, *Politico*, *War on the Rocks*, *Wired*, *Nieman Journalism Lab*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Der Tagesspiegel*, *ZEIT*, *Internationale Politik*, and *The Conversation*. Heidi has also appeared on the *BBC*, *CBC*, and *NPR*.

INTRODUCTION

John Maxwell Hamilton and Lara M. Brown

Fake news is a popular phrase with many meanings. Recently, it has often been used by politicians to reject or discredit information that is not to their liking. This messaging strategy places legitimate journalists and news organizations on the defensive, and sows confusion among the public about what sources to trust. Perhaps more problematic than the labeling of “real news” as “fake news” is the publication and distribution of known misinformation—promoting news that is fake—for motives ranging from politics to profit. In between these two extremes of intentional behavior exists another form of fake news that involves more accident and incompetence than malice, but does not create any less public confusion. It may well be that this latter form of “sloppy news,” which is pervasive because of today’s low standards for “journalism,” is one of the conditions that allows bad actors (individuals, organizations, and states) to spread fake news.

A good place to start thinking about fake news is to consider an essential feature of responsible journalism, the suppression of unreliable or incendiary information.

We acclaim the First Amendment for the license it gives journalists to share information that is inconvenient for the powerful. But another feature of responsible journalism is self-restraint. Journalists know many things they do not publish. This is because some information intrudes on that which should be private or its publication is gratuitous; because the threat to national security overrides the public’s right to know; because reporters cannot back up with credible evidence what they believe to be true; because opinions on or speculations about the meaning of news are not part of a journalist’s job.

Fake news honors no such limitations. The breakdown in the contemporary news media has opened the floodgates of misinformation. Now everyone, as the saying goes, can sit in their living room and be a journalist, spilling out whatever they imagine or want to imagine the news is. No editors look over their shoulders; no publisher stops them. What used to be said by a crazy uncle at the Thanksgiving table—and dismissed as the utterings of a crank—can now be put out as news. Stories relying on questionable evidence from an anonymous “reporter” can be laundered as it is forwarded or retweeted, often by legitimate reporters. It may eventually end up being covered by our most esteemed news outlets.

This is the world we live in today. It is one without adequate information border guards or even borders.

Other conferences and serious newsrooms have grappled with and lamented this type of fake (sloppy) news. Yet our understanding remains dim. As a result, our two schools—Louisiana State University’s Manship School of Mass Communication and George Washington University’s Graduate School of Political Management—collaborated in the spring of 2018 to add a new dimension to the exploration of fake news. We did not want to ask the familiar question: What is fake news? Instead we asked a less familiar one: Why is this happening?

We explore several issues. To what extent is faking new and to what extent is it a continuation of the past? The rise of modern technology has vivified faking, so we take a fresh look at that. But other overlooked factors also play a role. The resurgence of populism has made people more suspicious of authority and of established institutions. Similarly, political parties no longer play the mediating role they once did. Both of these phenomena have opened vast fields for fake news to take root and spread. Finally, our conference looks at possible solutions. A Pew Research Center study, released September 25, 2018, found that only four percent of Americans “have a lot of trust in the information they get from social media sites,” yet evidence emerges daily that bogus news does shape public opinion. It is imperative to find ways to fight against the distortion that takes place.

This conference brought together leading experts in journalism, history, communications, and political science. What follows are condensed versions of papers that were written for the conference, and a portion of the dialog that followed the paper presentations. The dialogue was edited, in consultation with discussants, to read seamlessly. Available on our schools’ respective websites are additional materials, including recordings of the conference sessions.

We do not presume to have all the answers. We do hope to have usefully enlarged the field of inquiry in the emergence of unfiltered and unreliable information that is polluting our democracy.

CHAPTER 1:
HISTORY AND FAKE NEWS

☰ Fake News: A Brief Modern History

John Maxwell Hamilton & Heidi J. S. Tworek

Fake news—or discussions about it—are everywhere. The broader analysis of the phenomenon tends to fall into three categories. First, some authors assert that fake news isn't new; we are living through a rerun of older blood libel accusations or P.T. Barnum-style frauds. Second, others see the current explosion of fake news as wholly unprecedented, caused by the new technology of the internet. Finally, many have dismissed fake news as simply meaning what Donald Trump doesn't like. These three definitions all miss the nuances of a phenomenon that is defining this era in American—really, world—politics. There are some elements of fake news that are old and some that are new. Differentiating between them is essential to understanding the contemporary problem and addressing it constructively.

Fake news existed in the past in multiple forms. By “fake news,” we mean untrue news published with the full knowledge and support of a news entity. This *institutional fake news*, as we call it, has been neither random nor errant. It has been an established feature of news throughout history.

In our extended article—“Fake News: A Modern History”—we found that it could serve economic or political purposes. Our present debates mostly focus on the political gains of fake news, whether foreign or domestic. Political fake news was especially potent during war in the twentieth century, when propaganda became a new tool of warfare along with airplanes and machine guns. Disinformation could demoralize and confuse the enemy, thus bringing victory quicker.

But fake news was recognized as a problem in times of peace as well. Just before World War I, a book appeared under the title *Fakes in American Journalism*. “American journalism,” it claimed, “holds the record for faking.” One of its themes was the perniciousness of economic fake news, which we argue is equally important. We distinguish between fake news created to bolster profits *within* the news industry and to bolster profits *outside* the news industry. Within the news industry, fake news stories could be created to accrue more profits to the publications that knowingly served up hoaxes to readers who wanted to believe them. This is familiar to us today from the infamous Macedonian teenagers who enriched themselves during the last presidential election by producing fake news. In the past, newspapers also published ads with exaggerated or faked claims. These profited both the newspapers and the businesses making the advertised products, like patent medicines.

Finally, understanding that fake news has a long history is important in realizing that it is a persistent problem and that finding solutions has been an ongoing challenge. The advertising industry, for instance, took steps to eliminate false ads in order to make those for legitimate products more credible. History also reveals factors that make today's fakery more pernicious than it was in the past.

We see these differences falling into three categories. First, the internet has enabled faster, wider diffusion of fake information. The famous moon hoax of the mid-19th century reached Europe, but it took months. Today it reaches Peoria, Paris, and Ulaanbaatar simultaneously, and is passed on to friends in minutes. Second, there is less accountability for its creation. While editors and journalists could theoretically be fired or publicly shamed for fake news, this is no longer the case for creators today. Fakers work anonymously, often in automated factories. Fake news was a cottage industry by individuals; now it is a mass production industry. Third, intermediating intuitions, such as the press and political parties, have lost considerable ability to assist the public in decision making—the former because technology has let all manner of irresponsible reporting circulate as though it were respectable and the latter because of such factors as a primary system that reduces the power of party leaders to vet candidates. “Red Scare” fears during the McCarthy era permitted wild, irresponsible claims to circulate in respectable circles; we are in such a time now.

Even though individuals today have greater powers of verification and can easily find out if fake news is true or not, many people either do not want or do not bother to check. One of the most powerful aspects of fake news is an old urge: people prefer to confirm their bias rather than challenge it. They can today satisfy this urge all day long.

To understand what is really new, we need to disentangle the different ways that fake news appeared in the past and to understand why it appeared when it did. Only this way can we combat the contemporary version of an old problem.

🗨 Fake News and the Usable Past

Tom Rosenstiel response

In their paper, John Maxwell Hamilton and Heidi J.S. Tworek look back at journalism's messy history and try to place the current sense of crisis surrounding "fake news" into a more accurate context. It is, in that sense, a paper that tries to do just what we all look to historians for: to provide some "chronological proportionality" to the present—to find a "usable past."

To what extent, they are asking, is the current challenge to the U.S. and global news media's role as an intermediary between lies and accuracy a new phenomenon? To what extent is it fundamentally different from earlier times? Is it, indeed, a crisis at all?

They note several cases in journalism's past when the press willingly engaged in deceptions and falsehoods. Usually the motive was commercial—sensationalizing to grow their audience and increase profits. In their extended article—"Fake News: A Modern History"—they draw an intellectual line between yellow journalism and patent medicine peddlers of the past to Alex Jones's *Infowars* empire, which passes along hate and falsehood in an operation funded by selling vitamin supplements from Jones's own company.

The strongest value of looking backward, of course, is not to find that there are antecedents to our present in the past—we will always find them. History's value, rather, is it helps us to understand how we arrived at the present and to recognize what is truly new and why. Hamilton and Tworek note three differences between the past and now: faster, wider diffusion of fake information; less accountability for its creation; and greater powers of verification by users.

But I think there may be even more subtle and important differences in two other points in the paper. First, they note that "declining trust in institutions helps to explain the rise of fake news as much as other factors like social media platforms." That insight could not be more potent.

The decline of trust in media, which creates the soil for false news to take root, predates the internet. It began in the 1980s and fully half of the 35-point decline in Gallup poll numbers of trust in media occurred before the year 2000. The decline coincides with the rise of cable television, which expanded the TV dial from four stations to hundreds, and to the deregulation of media of the 1980s and beyond that gave birth to talk radio and further commercialized media norms. The decline in trust in media tracks with, though is somewhat more severe, than the decline in trust in other institutions.

Second, the news industry that in the past engaged in sensationalism and fakery, such as the yellow journalism of Pulitzer and Hearst, evolved. The established news organizations that endured developed more aspirational norms of good behavior—higher journalism standards. Those standards have been undermined by technological fragmentation of media and the collapse of the financial model that allowed journalism to develop those standards.

One reason the rise of fake news matters is because it is part of a larger political decline in the United States, which is defined by rising political polarization, a paralyzed legislative branch, and a growing sense of a politicized judiciary. Donald Trump’s presidency is the triumph of a dark view of the American scene. In his campaign, a Reaganesque vision of “morning in America” (rhetoric echoed in the failed candidacies of Jeb Bush, Marco Rubio and others) was beaten by Trump’s message of “American carnage” and the idea that only he could make the country great again.

That vision, with its clearly despotic harmonic tones, is fundamentally created by the weakening of intermediating guardrail institutions in America, including the decline of political parties, a loss of Congressional leaders who hold bi-partisan clout and an even more subtle crumbling of governing and political communication norms that fostered a degree of respect and validity towards the opposing side. The news media is one of those mediating institutions that has lost trust, weakened its connection to the audience, and damaged its norms.

This is new. In a very real sense, the political institutions that once provided the guardrails for democracy, have been replaced by new institutions. Chief among them are technology platform companies that are so new they have not begun to reckon with their power or their responsibility.

Discussion on History and Fake News

**This transcript of the 2018 Breaux Symposium has been edited, with the approval of the participants, from its original form in order to clarify the original ideas that were expressed.*

JACK HAMILTON: We have a lot to learn about fake news, which is itself elusive. It's like a deadly virus. It always seems to morph into something else when you think you've figured it out. This conference aims to explore why fake news has become so powerful. What is the enabling environment? What accounts for the emergence of this concept that wars within our democratic system and wars with itself? For the phrase "fake news" is in fact an oxymoron. It's like talking about a healthy disease.

TOM ROSENSTIEL: I want to make three quick points. One is that in the older media infrastructure, their values were very much invested in being gatekeepers—standing at the gate and letting in facts that have been verified and leaving out rumors and things that they think are wrong. The traditional gatekeepers also said "I'm letting civil discourse in, but things that are too extreme or uncivil I'm keeping out." That narrowed the ideological spectrum. It gave an establishment flavor to what was allowed through the gate, but it also kept some of the most polarizing rhetoric out, at least out of the common space. In effect, the press, without thinking about it all that much, was creating a common space.

Now, Facebook, Google, and other companies that were built to target advertisements toward consumers have been exploited by political actors and foreign governments to separate us as citizens, to accentuate the tribalism that exists below the surface. This divisiveness was largely kept out of the public discourse that we had in the earlier system, not that the earlier system was a golden egg.

We also know that the public conversation that occurs on the web is what I would call a kind of bipolar conversation. People are either hysterical or euphoric. People don't go online to say, "I'm unsure what I think of this. I feel very bland about this."

In addition, speed matters here because of the ancient problem that we have, where "a lie can go around the world before the truth can get its pants on." This is an old saying, but the bad guys have a lot more speed now. The phenomenon we face is that actually we've lost interest in trying to know the truth before the next amazing thing happens. Some of you may have a sense that the Trump presidency illustrates this. The story of

the week is actually superseded by the story of the next hour, and you're exhausted by the end of the day.

One last thing, when I covered Newt Gingrich in 1994 he had a desire to nationalize the discussion of politics. He thought that could strengthen the Republican party. That effort to nationalize our political discourse has succeeded to a large degree. Social media helps to do that. Technology helps to do that. Over the years I was at Pew, I saw the interest in local news decline gradually as we saw the internet come on, and today, in the last 15 years, while the number of journalists in the United States has dropped by about 35 percent according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics data, the number of journalists in Washington has grown. The number of journalists in L.A. has grown slightly. The number of journalists in New York is stable. The number of journalists everywhere else has dropped. So, that also leads to news that is Trump and Washington-centric.

CHERYL W. THOMPSON: Our job is to cover the news and hold people accountable, and right now the news is the White House, and the resources are being poured into that.

LARA BROWN: I think there's a deeper level where nationalization is a problem—all of the local issues become infused with the red/blue national debate, as though filling potholes is somehow a partisan decision. In other words, at every level, political conversation is this proxy war for the president and the opposing party. That's where I worry about the loss of local news, and the inability to see any story outside of that partisan prism. I think this leads to more belief in fake news stories.

TOM ROSENSTIEL: Reporters, when they write stories, give a kind of tone music to the story that is written partly by things sources tell them that are off the record. The reporter hears that and thinks, "Okay, I need to reflect the things that are off the record." So, I think the sense of everyone's hair being on fire is partly why the coverage feels like everyone's hair is on fire—because reporters are trying to reflect the sense of alarm and mania and hysteria that their sources are feeling but are unable to say even on background.

MICHAEL CORNFIELD: In Jack and Heidi's paper, one of their central insights was the relation between fake news and wartime governments. We're

in a very unusual war right now. It doesn't feel like a total war. It isn't a total war. But, it's year 17 of a war, and furthermore, there are issues involving North Korea, Iran, and Syria where we sidle up to the topic of war and then it seems to fade away, and the character of war has changed. How has that changed what used to be called propaganda and disinformation into a species of fake news? We all know the cliché about "truth being the first casualty of war." Well, let's pop the top off of that cliché and explore the dynamics. What is it about war and wartime governments that generates fake news?

HEIDI TWOREK: There are two sides of the coin. There's the propaganda side, which is what we're often talking about when we use the term "fake news," but there is also the censorship side, where certain things are not being released or not being covered because of greater government control over information.

JACK HAMILTON: Every side says that it doesn't do propaganda. If you look at the British archives from World War I, officials routinely say: "We don't do any propaganda. We don't even know how to do propaganda." Actually, their propaganda was probably the best. Equally interesting, people who ran Wilson's Committee on Public Information in World War I were good people. They were progressives; they wanted to make better government. They saw publicity as a positive word.

But, propaganda becomes very seductive, and good people inevitably end up doing bad things. They begin to think the outcome is more important than the method. They always say they're only going to tell the truth and they're not doing propaganda. And they always end up lying and putting out fake news.

The reason that happens in war is because, first of all, in total war you have to use information to keep people on board—to enlist, to conserve food, to beat the enemy. So, the stakes are very high. And when the stakes are really high, you're willing to go for outcome rather than principle.

I would submit that what happens today is people have decided that the stakes are so high in politics that they don't care about the method. One of the things that's so powerful today in politics is the lack of principle. Principle has been put aside because of concern over the outcome and fake news fits into

that because you say, “I’ve got to get this outcome,” and one way to do it is fake news.

TOM ROSENSTIEL: Garry Kasparov—the Russian chess champion turned dissident—put it nicely when he said the real point of fake news is not to make people believe the fake news, it’s to get them to doubt the real news. It’s to create uncertainty.

LARA BROWN: You’re essentially saying we’re still at war, we’re on a war footing, we’ve basically been on a war footing since 9/11. So, both on a war footing literally, but then also maybe figuratively in terms of the parties. Both parties feel that it’s Armageddon if the other side wins, so it’s absolutely a war to claw back the institutions for themselves at every election.

LEN APCAR: There is an ideological war going on here, and the Internet Research Agency and the Russians see social media as a dream vehicle to create confusion and doubt.

JACK HAMILTON: So, there are two kinds of battlefields. One is a domestic battlefield that has one kind of dynamic, right? And then we have another one, which is foreign. I think we need to be careful about conflating that they’re all the same. They’re very different.

DAVID KARPFF: So, we’ve been at war for 17 years, but we don’t behave domestically as though we’re at war. And I think part of the reason why we now see this behavior at the domestic level isn’t because we’ve decided it’s so serious, but because on the international scale, we’ve decided it’s so trivial. During the Cold War there was an assumption among elites that there are certain behaviors against each other that we can’t use because the Soviets are out there targeting us. So, we can argue domestically but there are certain lines we can’t cross. Only a couple years after the fall of the Soviet Union, you get this ramping up of polarization starting with Newt Gingrich and the “Contract with America.” Applying propaganda at the domestic level the way that we used to do in wartime internationally only starts happening when we stop behaving as though we’re at war and stop behaving as though there are broader international consequences.

HEIDI TWOREK: The way Russians are now going about this is in some ways quite different than the purposes of the Soviet Union, even if they are using some similar techniques. The purpose of Soviet propaganda abroad was to try and make countries communist, right? And that seems to me quite different from Russia's goals today. Is Russia really trying to make other countries like Russia? The techniques are quite similar to the past, but the outcomes that they're aiming for are different.

DAVID KARP: I'm convinced that social confusion is a big part of this. Social confusion leads to a general mistrust because if people don't have hard facts and information to rely on, they tend to believe whatever they might hear. The more division you can sow in the United States, the more it undercuts the rest of the democratic process. Trump's attacks on American media from within the United States, which destabilizes trust in the American press, actually weakens our response to the Russians and other foreign enemies. This is because the traditional response was that we have a free press and people would believe things that came out of our media and that was probably our most powerful weapon in unpermissive societies. So, Trump's working at cross purposes—by destabilizing the press in the United States it helps him politically, and at the same time it weakens the country's ability to respond to fake news.

HEIDI TWOREK: I think there are a bunch of overlapping aims when it comes to fake news. For Russia, a lot of it is also domestic, because it's a demonstration of strength to a domestic Russian population that you can interfere in America and other strong democracies. So, there's an enormous domestic component for Putin to build consensus in Russia, because as their economy weakens, one of the ways that he retains support is by appearing strong on the international stage. The Russian interference on the international stage, I think has two goals. One is to try and secure and maintain regional dominance in Crimea, Syria, etc., and in order to do that, you not only need to have disinformation about Ukraine, you also need to undermine the Western alliance that was trying to preserve the territorial integrity of a place like Ukraine. It's not just about sowing some confusion in the U.S. There are other kinds of hard power political goals that are going on here.

- JACK HAMILTON:** One of our most powerful tools we had overseas was that we said our newspapers told the truth, and that we had a democratic government. One of the best ways for the Russian government to suggest that they are better is to discredit the American government by showing that it is chaotic and dysfunctional.
- PAUL MIHAILIDIS:** Russia's objectives are one thing, but the environment that allows this to be impactful is really important. I think that has a lot to do with institutional trust. To me, looking at the audience side or the consumer side is essential. It's really interesting to think about the cynical versus the skeptical dispositions.
- CHERYL W. THOMPSON:** I'd like to take a step back and ask what is fake news? It's such a broad term, right? It may have existed a hundred years ago, but it really took on a life of its own with Donald Trump.
- MATTHEW DALLEK:** One thing is a kind of sustained attack that has intensified over the past five or six decades on the mainstream news media. The John Birch Society and Robert Welch echoed what we're hearing now in terms of their attacks on mainstream news organizations to discredit them and to say, "What they're telling is not reality." A second major piece is all the anonymous hoaxes. But those agendas are not necessarily in sync. I mean, Russians may have a distinct interest versus another group of people, like Alex Jones and *Infowars*, for example. Those twin forces sow a level of doubt, not just about media institutions, but really about reality, right? The media is kind of weaponized in a sense. But certainly, there has been a sustained attack, principally from the right, though the left does some of it too, on mainstream news organizations that has intensified over the past five or six decades.
- LARA BROWN:** Herman Melville's book, *The Confidence Man*, is basically about how the American disposition for skepticism and cynicism leads to profound gullibility. So, in fact, it's precisely because we say we don't trust anything, that we're actually able to be duped time and time and time again. The paranoid style of American politics—this long-running discussion about American politics having a kind of individualist, anti-authoritarian kind of stance. I think there is something to that.

SID MILKIS: There have been many periods of polarization throughout our history. What I think is different now is that it tends to be much more ad hominem, much more personalized. I don't think since the Civil War we've had a situation like we have now where you're not only seeing the opposition as holding opinions you disagree with or principles you disagree with, but where you see them as the enemy. And I think that that leads into the use of fake news as a political weapon to demonize the opposition.

ANDREW SELEE: When we talk about fake news here, we're talking primarily about things that are made up out of whole cloth. But, to Sid's point, the notion that Donald Trump started on was the sense that the media was biased. It was the idea that there's a point of view in the media and that was not his point of view. He's ramped up his rhetoric by disqualifying the media entirely and acting as if legitimate stories were being made up out of whole cloth. To some extent, Donald Trump grabbed onto something that has a little bit of truth in it and then ramped it all the way up, right? One of the reasons why propaganda works so well in wartime is we're willing to believe things that may not be exactly true, but then we go along with it. We live in a more tribal society, in terms of how we consume information, we're a little more susceptible to believing fake news. Even when we know we were duped, we say, "That's okay because it was pretty close." I think a lot of people who support Donald Trump are that way as well. He says "Fake news." They go, "Well, it isn't fake news, but there is something about that story I don't like."

DAVID KARP: You mentioned in the paper three different things that maybe make history different from today. I would add a fourth, which is, along with faster diffusion of information, we also have a continuously evolving communication environment. So, the thing that stands out for me about the fake medical ads of the past is that once they identified the problem, they were able to set up a regulatory framework to deal with it. But now, if we recognized a problem in the framework of Facebook in 2011, it would have likely borne no relevance to Facebook in 2017. The digital media environment keeps on changing. This points me toward the question of what regulators should do, if we actually had regulators who wanted to regulate, which we don't. It gets very hard because the media environment that we have today

and the media institutions that we have today keep on changing in odd ways.

TOM ROSENSTIEL: Newspapers were just beginning to get advertising in 1900. They got their money from circulation for the most part before that, so the analogy that they were taking these ads they knew were bullshit because they needed the money is very analogous to Facebook being unwilling to solve a problem that has been too lucrative for them up until now. The regulation didn't come in 1901, it took a while.

JACK HAMILTON: Who actually led the way to control ads? It was advertisers, because they wanted to make sure if they had high-quality products, they weren't tainted by patent medicine ads.

TOM ROSENSTIEL: Advertisers pressured newspapers to become more responsible.

HEIDI TWOREK: We have to remember that there have been many continuously-evolving types of media environments in the past. A European Union high-level expert group put out a report a few weeks ago, which they used to say, "Let's stop using the term 'fake news,'" precisely for so many of the reasons that we've described, because it's become something that is used for political purposes. Let's instead call it disinformation. And part of the reasoning behind that is because the term "fake news" is taking off in a bunch of other countries that may have less permissive societies. Malaysia has a fake news law, for example, and the first person who was brought to court on that, was actually tried regarding a factual inaccuracy that was corrected, but the individual was still convicted under a fake news law.

CHAPTER 2:
POPULISM AND FAKE NEWS

☰ Populism in America, Then and Now

Jay Cost

Over the last eight years, populist waves have swept across the country—from the Tea Party, to the Bernie Sanders candidacy, and now the Donald Trump presidency. This has coincided with a decline in the public’s trust in mainstream news organizations, opening the door for journalism of a questionable caliber—including fake news. Before addressing the populist media landscape, we have to recognize that populist movements have diverse ideological beliefs, which creates a puzzle as to what it means to be a “populist.” This is all the more the case when we consider that populist movements from history—like the Jacksonian Democrats and the Populist party of the 1890s—held views that have little correspondence to contemporary policy debates.

An alternative framework is to view populism as a critique not of the “what” of politics, but rather the “how.” From this perspective, populism can be understood as an attempt to reinstate republicanism. Populists believe that elected officials have failed to uphold republican virtue and the protection of the greater good, and instead believe that government elites represent special interests who have managed to acquire undue influence in the halls of power.

In the language of public-choice economics, populism is a complaint about the “principal-agent problem” that naturally arises in representative democracy. The virtue of a representative system is that it can, as James Madison argued in *Federalist* No. 10, “refine and enlarge” public opinion by passing it through a “medium” of esteemed citizens who are committed to justice and the general welfare. But this need not be the case. Elected officials (the agents) can use their power for their own purposes, or to benefit some other faction, rather than the public at large. Meanwhile, the voters back home (the principals) may lack the necessary information to figure out that their representatives are not actually representing them.

From this perspective, various populist movements begin to make sense with one another, despite their highly divergent policy preferences. Arguably the first populist movement was not even American. In the early 18th century, Lord Bolingbroke and the “Country Whigs” argued that Prime Minister Robert Walpole’s system of public finance was illicitly robbing power from the true foundation of the commonwealth, the landed gentry.

Bolingbrokean polemics were highly influential during the Revolutionary period, for they helped colonists contextualize their specific

grievances about English highhandedness into a larger story about how they were being abused by a corrupt system of government. Those ideas continued to exercise influence long after the Revolution was won. The Jeffersonian Republicans of the 1790s believed that Alexander Hamilton and the Federalists were misusing their authority in order to destroy the principles of the Declaration of Independence and to establish a monarchy along the (corrupt) British model. The Jacksonian Democrats of the 1830s feared the concentration of wealth, and with it, political power, in the Second Bank of the United States, which they believed had become a tool of the commercial minority against the agrarian masses. The Bryan Democrats of the 1890s thought that the gold standard was detrimental to the great masses, but remained in place because a clique of eastern bankers had come to dominate politics.

More recently, the Tea Party, the Sanders candidacy, and the Trump presidency have complained about the “Washington Cartel,” the “1 percent,” and the “swamp,” respectively. This is a diverse set of malefactors, except that each of them, in the populist telling, has authority that they should not possess in a properly republican system of government.

In general, populists tend to have certain socioeconomic and psychological qualities in common. More often than not, populists feel as though their government is “distant.” In the early days of the republic, this had more to do with physical distance than it does today. But even in the present context, there is a sentiment that government happens away from the influence of the everyday citizen. Relatedly, there tends to be anxiety about wealth—even among economic conservatives who are relatively unconcerned about economic inequality. The problem is not so much wealth itself, but how wealth can be used to gain political power. Moreover, populism often has a nostalgic quality to it—whereby populists remember previous generations exercising more influence than average people do today. Oftentimes, those memories are highly stylized, exaggerating how good past generations had it, and instead serve as a way to amplify the present-day critique.

Finally, populist rhetoric is often overwrought, but its criticisms are rarely without at least some merit. The principal-agent problem is a real dilemma in representative government, and there can be no doubt that certain groups, usually the wealthy or well-positioned, are able to influence government more than everybody else. Thus, even if we may disagree with the particular policy grievances of this or that populist group,

or take offense to the rhetoric they employ, we should take the rise and durability of such a movement as an opportunity to evaluate whether our government is behaving in a properly republican manner.

Populism creates a problem with “fake news” in two ways. First, because populists have lost trust in established institutions of government and culture, they are prone to misidentify reliable news sources as fake. One of the challenges with populism is that while it is often animated by a genuine set of issue concerns, its outrage is easily misdirected, as populists know something is wrong but cannot precisely identify what that something is. So, a one-time reader of the newspaper or watcher of the evening news, when imbued with populist frustration, may lump these news sources in with the government, and erroneously discount the reliable information they provide.

Second, this loss of trust creates an information vacuum, which can potentially be filled by news that is actually fake. People who no longer trust their former sources for information still wish to acquire information, so they go around shopping for new outlets. This makes them prone to manipulation by demagogues, who feed them false information that they accept because it reinforces their existing grievances and frustrations.

Taken together, this amounts to one way that populism can be a self-defeating sentiment. People who are legitimately upset with their government misdirect their anger at reliable news sources, embrace unreliable sources, and therefore fail to acquire the information necessary to influence the government to correct its course.

🗨️ The Constitutional Roots of Fake News

Sidney M. Milkis response

Fake news, Jay Cost argues, might be endemic to populism, which re-sents “the establishment.” More provocatively, his essay suggests that mistrust of news sources is inherent to the “principal-agent” dilemma posed by the American Constitution, which, for all its virtues, does not guarantee an active and competent citizenry. This was the complaint of the Antifederalists, who believed that the cup of power was too removed from the lips of the people—that representatives (“agents”) in Publius’s “republican government,” especially the president, Senate, and Courts, would not “refine and enlarge” the views of the people (“principals”), as James Madison promised, but would instead mute them. This was especially likely to happen when power was shifted from the States, the principal sites of government in the Articles of Confederation, to a national government that would rule over a large and diverse society. What the architects of the Constitution heralded as a bold experiment in self-government on a grand scale, the Antifederalists viewed as a coup. The opponents of the Constitution saw the Framers as attempting to divide and reign over the people, in order to prevent populist uprisings like the one led by Daniel Shays. Madison admitted as much in a letter to Jefferson, written soon after the convention, although he insisted the Constitution marked a republican variant of “divide et impera.”

Jay Cost’s essay thus avers that populism, and the conspiratorial view of the world that agitates it, is an endemic symptom of a crisis of citizenship in the United States. Although it sometimes expresses sentiments we do not like—nativism, racism, isolationism—we should recognize that insurgency’s real enemy is the tendency for public officials to manipulate constitutional principles and institutions to serve their own ambition. In one sense, fake news is a problem because intense partisans readily believe the worst of their political enemies and condemn all criticism of their political friends. More insidiously, however, fake news is the most pernicious feature of what populists denigrate as an elite system of government that mistrusts, indeed scorns, the people.

Madison referred to the complex checks and balances of the Constitution as a system of “successive filtrations.” Cue Donald Trump at a mass rally in Melbourne, Florida soon after his inauguration:

I’m here because I want to be among my friends and among the people. ...I want to speak to you without the filter of the fake news. The dishonest media which has published

one false story after another.... When the media lies to the people, I will never ...let them get away with it.¹

For good measure, Trump invoked Thomas Jefferson, a great defender of a free press who had grown frustrated by the harsh attacks on his Embargo policy (a restriction on trade far more draconian than Trump's "America First" program). Jefferson ranted in a confidential letter of June 14, 1807, "Nothing can now be believed which is seen in a newspaper. Truth itself becomes suspicious by being put into that polluted vehicle."

Although Jefferson was provoked by the harsh partisan wars between his Republican Party and the Federalists (even urging that his political enemies be prosecuted in States for their pernicious attacks on his administration), he never referred to the press as "the enemy of the people." His concern was how raw factionalism cultivated an environment that was polluted by the "demoralising (sic) practice of feeding the public mind habitually on slander, and the depravity of taste which this nauseous aliment induces." Such a fraught atmosphere, as Jay writes at the conclusion of his essay, exposed the people "to manipulation by demagogues, who feed them false information that they accept because it reinforces their existing grievances and frustrations."

Jay suggests that the "democratic wish," as James Morone called it, is cyclical. To quote a refrain attributed to Mark Twain: "History does not repeat itself; but it does rhyme." Yet major developments have played out over the twentieth and twenty-first century that have tilted the inherent tension between institutional constraints and antinomianism too far in the direction of an unfiltered strain of populism. Similarly, there has been a decline of anything resembling a "Fourth Estate," which mediates public debate. Instead, a raw and disruptive "social medium" has emerged—the breeding ground of fake news.

I would suggest that the development of an executive-centered administrative state, which both Democrats and Republicans have embraced since the consolidation of the modern presidency during the protracted reign of Franklin Roosevelt, offers important clues to the causes of our present discontents. For all of the enormous differences between the supporters of Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders, they are united

1 Donald Trump speech at rally on February 18, 2017, Melbourne, Florida.

in the view that the contemporary American politics alienates everyone except those organized interests that bore within the administrative state (popularly denounced as the “establishment”). These self-styled democratic socialists and authoritarian nationalists seem to intuit, if not fully grasp, Theodore Lowi’s admonition that the most accurate characterization of the modern administrative state is not conflict between Democrats and Republicans, but rather a government-sponsored elitism that provides “socialism for the organized and capitalism for the unorganized.”

Perhaps Lowi—whose views were always brilliantly contrarian—might see a phoenix emerging from the ashes: an unfiltered contest between Left and Right that jolts the rank apathy (“the nightmare of administrative boredom”) that afflicts “interest group liberalism.” Yet as *The Personal President* warned, our partisan battles have become all too presidency-centered—dominated by ad hominem assaults, not only on the programs of the opposition’s leader, but also on his or her character. The Republicans mobilized opposition to Obama by attacking him personally—most notoriously in the Donald Trump led “birther movement.” Similarly, Democrats have mobilized support against Trump, not so much by revitalizing progressive principles (nobody seems too excited by Charles Schumer’s “Better Deal”), but by attacking the president’s competence and sanity (and anticipating Trump’s impeachment, or his cabinet and Congress deploying the disability provisions of the 25th Amendment). Unlike Obama, however, Trump has used mass rallies and social media to respond in kind, attacking the established press as the vanguard of an elitist plot to destroy his presidency. Trump thus appears to mark a reckoning—a startling testimony to Lowi’s warning that the greatest threat to modern liberalism, to its fragmented and insular character, is a plebiscitary politics that promises to “deconstruct the administration state,” which regularly exposes the American people to populist leaders who, as Alexander Hamilton warned, “flatter [the people’s] prejudices to betray their interests.”²

2 Alexander Hamilton, *Federalist No. 71*, in *The Debate On The Constitution: Federalist and Antifederalist Speeches, Articles, and Letters During the Struggle over Ratification, Part Two, January to August 1788*, ed. Bernard Bailyn, (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1984), 357-360.

Discussion on Populism and Fake News

JAY COST: It's impossible to define populism purely as a substantive set of issue positions, because Trump is a populist and he's for higher tariffs, but, for the original agrarian populist, one of their secondary issues was lower tariffs. I don't think that you can define populism in terms of actual policy prescriptions, at least not over the course of American history, and often times not even within the moment. Conservative populism today runs a policy gamut, at least in terms of emphases. I mentioned Ron Paul and Trump, but there's also that sort of Ted Cruz-style libertarianism that you could say is populist. So, instead I thought that it's better to understand populism as a branch of republican politics, small r—civic republicanism. Populism is not at its essence a demand for certain policies, but instead it's a critique of how politics is being run.

In U.S. history, populism has often been a critique about wealthy people who are looking to centralize power around themselves, often times using financial economic policy to rob the people of their natural rights. This continues into the 20th century. The Progressives were not strictly populists, they were wealthier and they were more eastern than the agrarian Populist, but they appropriated a lot of the populist rhetoric from the 1890s to critique the two parties. You see it again with George Wallace in the 1960s and then more recently with the Tea Party.

Through all of these instances of populism, there is a kind of version of the principle-agent problem manifesting itself, and you get a couple of general themes. One is that populism is the politics of place. Those who are closer to the seat of government or finance have advantages that those who are farther away do not possess and this was particularly important before information could travel very quickly. This was the main anxiety that Jefferson and Madison had in the 1790s about Hamilton's economic policies because Hamilton's friends knew what Hamilton was doing and could make personal investments based on it, whereas it would take weeks for the information to travel to North Carolina. Another relates back to the Country Whigs who contrasted themselves with the Court Party, right? So, it's sort of "Country," but being the virtuous citizens out in the hinterland versus the corrupted "Court" of the seat of government.

And that lends itself also to a politics of otherness. It's "us versus them," which has in its background a sort of politics of paranoia and hyperbole. It often gets down to sort of "we are the true children of the revolution" or whatever, and this other faction is actually opposed to democracy and republicanism and wants some version of oligarchy. And the final point that I would make is that populism also has a kind of nostalgia to it. The Jeffersonians in the 1790s were arguing that the Federalists were looking to undo the revolution. Jackson made a similar point. And you see this as well in the Populist and Progressive movements where there's this claim of endeavoring to restore something that had been lost. I think you can see that with the use of the phrase the "Tea Party." It's meant to harken back to a time when Americans were hearty defenders of their individual rights and to try to stir people up with memories. Even if that is, or is not, a historically accurate recollection, it is nevertheless very powerful.

SID MILKIS: The Antifederalists were the first populists in the United States that Jay talks about in his paper, and they didn't believe Madison when he said the Constitution would refine and enlarge the public views. That's what Madison said in *Federalist Paper* No. 10, in great defense of this Constitution. Instead, the Antifederalists believed it would mute the voice of the public. And this principle-agent problem was especially likely to manifest when power was shifted as it was when they went from the Articles of Confederation to the Constitution—from the states to a national government which would rule over a large and diverse society. Maybe this is where the idea of place comes from, which is very interesting. Madison argued that the Constitution wouldn't destroy democracy or popular sovereignty, but it would protect democracy from its worst tendencies—mob rule and incompetence. Populists feared that public officials would manipulate Constitutional principles and institutions to serve their own ambition.

"History does not repeat itself, but it does rhyme," and there's an essence of that in Jay's paper. But, we need to know more about what arouses populist rebellions and when they are likely to happen. It's interesting that we have the Populist movement at the end of the 19th century when then, like now, we had a great deal of partisan polarization. Then, like now, we

had a great deal of demographic change and economic dislocation. So, on the cyclical view, one would have to think about the conditions that arouse it. I think parallel developments occur politically. There is a lot of talk about the recent decline in the influence of the press's ability to filter political conflict, and that this creates the breeding ground for fake news. I like to recall the chilling line from William Jennings Bryan's iconic cross of gold speech. He said, "You come to us and tell us that the great citizens are in favor of the gold standard. We reply that the great cities rest upon our broad and fertile prairies. Burn down your cities and leave our farms, and your cities will spring up again as if by magic. But, destroy our farms, and the grass will grow in the streets of every city in the country." A variant of that could show up at one of Donald Trump's rallies. So, there is that old frame, but at the same time there is a commitment in the Populist movement of the 1890s to expand the regulatory power of the national government and make government directly accountable to public opinion. That suggests that the Populists were an important precursor to the Progressive movement. And I really think the Progressive movement is an important juncture in our nation's political history. We have weak parties now and rank partisanship, and I say that's different from the end of the 19th century.

JAY COST: One illustration of the relationship between populism and the news is that when Madison and Jefferson and a handful of others decided to launch an organized opposition to the economic policies of Hamilton, the first thing they did was bring Philip Freneau to start a newspaper. By the end of the 1790s, there were Jeffersonian Republican papers all throughout the country, writing all sorts of salacious, scandalous things, and so the Federalists enacted the Sedition Act of 1798, which was a reaction to what they thought was fake news. So, there was a sort of change in the media landscape during that decade, where you see the proliferation of newspapers and there were some Republican rags talking in the most hyperbolic, aggressive way. Newspapers ended up sort of getting captured by the party organizations in the 1820s and '30s and repurposed in a more institutionalized fashion. But, when this proliferation of newspapers happened, it was very chaotic and anything could have been said, and there was no way to sort of get a handle

on whether this was a good paper or a bad paper, which I think has corollaries with the rise of social media in the provision of news. And there was a fear that the Republican press was just really the mouthpiece of the French Republic. The Sedition Act and the Alien Acts were actually two parts of the same whole because the Federalists wanted to cut down on the foreign influence in our government.

SID MILKIS: I would just add that it wasn't really just fake news. There really was a sense if you read those statutes—the Alien and Sedition Act of 1798 and the Sedition Act of 1918—that it was a problem to criticize the government. There was something about the way the presidency was set up, particularly during emergency situations, that raised serious doubts about whether it was a good thing to allow people to criticize the presidency. It wasn't just called fake news; it was called sedition. And I think that's part of an authoritarian strain that does emerge from time to time in American politics.

MATTHEW DALLEK: Can you both speak a little bit to the question of how central you think race has been historically and currently to these so-called Populist movements or uprisings? Have there been any moments of cross racial populist moments?

JAY COST: Populism doesn't necessarily have to be entangled with race, but it often is. When Jim Crow comes in, in a large measure it reflects an anxiety among the Southern plantation class, the Bourbon Democrats who were anxious about a cross-racial alliance between hard scrabble white farmers and black sharecroppers.

And so, I think that one of the reasons why populism gets wrapped up in race is it gets back to what I had suggested was sort of this politics of nostalgia, where they look back to this old time when things were “properly organized.” Well, the chances are, one of the reasons white Populists had everything they wanted was because blacks were systematically excluded from the political process and excluded from the distribution of public benefits. So, it's not an inherently racial dimension, but, it often takes on a racial cast.

TIM KLEIN: The agrarian Populists of the 1890s attempted to form a bi-racial movement between poor white farmers and poor black sharecroppers in the South. Many white Populist leaders were talking about the need to include blacks in the movement and unite the working class—regardless of race—in order to challenge the supremacy of the Southern plantation elites and the Northern commercial elites. This bi-racial farmer and labor movement ultimately failed, and there was a racial backlash among many Southern white Populists, like Tom Watson of Georgia, who turned on black Populists and reignited a racist and backward strain in American history.

This all connects to fake news because populism, at its core, is a critique of elites—a critique of expertise. So, when Donald Trump goes after fake news, he’s going after elite news—the mainstream media. Populism is often an expression of distrust by people who are far from the center of power toward people who have power. Attacking the media is one way of attacking political insiders and people who are close to power. Trump’s use of the term “fake news” is a pretty good expression of that populist impulse that seeks to delegitimize political elites—including those in the media.

JAY COST: I think something to bear in mind about populism is that it often has been co-opted. Maybe it starts out as an earnest movement with grievances that are made in good faith, but the populist spirit can often be sort of captured, which I think frankly is what’s happened with Donald Trump.

HEIDI TWOREK: The media’s personification of elites because they’re a particularly visible elite, makes a populist more likely to pick on them rather than other elite groups who exist. So, is there something about the media that personifies elitism?

JAY COST: It’s relatively new to see the media getting wrapped up in sort of the populist critique. I mean, it happened in the ’60s, with talk of “the liberal press,” right? And the rising prominence of television gave a particular outlet to the identification of the media being part of the political establishment.

Those who are in the capitals of finance and government, and the media outlets in New York and Washington, DC are easy fodder for populist demagogues, because they already don’t like

New York City. Populists have never liked New York City. And so, *The New York Times* is an easy target, and so, for that matter, is *The Washington Post* and all of the major broadcast networks that are out of New York.

SID MILKIS: Populists don't like intermediary organizations. They don't like parties. They don't like a press that stands between them and the people. So, it's not an accident that William Jennings Bryan was the first presidential candidate to appeal directly to the American people and created that new tradition of the whistle-stop campaign tour.

JACK HAMILTON: So, there's fake news, which is something that's not true. It's artificial—it's perverse. Then, there is calling something "fake news" to discredit it. So, there's sort of two ways to use the word "fake." Is calling things "fake news" to discredit them something that comes in play when you have populism? For example, if you don't like institutions and you don't believe them, so you say, "Oh, they're fake news." You thought they were fake news because they don't relate to you, right? And that makes you susceptible to news that is actually fake. All this undermines the traditional gatekeeper function.

MICHAEL CORNFIELD: And there's an important language aspect to this as well—there is a language of populism. Roseanne Barr, Michelle Wolf, Bernie Sanders, and Donald Trump all speak this populist language. They use simpler words. They're more vulgar. And the louder they are, the more authentic they appear to their supporters. The populist language shows that you're not an elitist. You're not writing perfect sentences like they do in *The New York Times* or at the university. You're speaking the language of the people. And so, we have different agendas because populism ultimately is a rhetorical style. It's not an ideology.

SID MILKIS: It's a bombastic style.

MICHAEL CORNFIELD: It's bombastic and it's an earthy style. It's an anti-elitist style.

DAVID KARP: Sketching an intellectual history of populism through the centuries of the United States, as this paper has done, and reading it while thinking about today's populists, I wonder whether the

paper ends up giving today's populists too much credit, because I wonder whether what we are seeing right now is populism as ideology or populism as particularly cliky trope? The way that I think Donald Trump, to be frank, gets to populism is like a standup comic—he sees what lines are performing well for his audience and then he provides more of those lines. When Trump rails against the banks and then immediately appoints a bunch of bankers to his cabinet, that doesn't strike me as an ideology that he's abandoning so much as the absence of an ideology to begin with. It was a trope that was getting laughs, it was getting applause, so he sticks with that because we now have a feedback network. Is it that simple?

TOM ROSENSTIEL: This isn't actually a populist movement at all. It's a cynical exploitation of populist sentiment that's held by a small group.

JAY COST: Let me just say that I think it's important to conceptualize populism as a principle-agent problem. In a principle-agent relationship, the agent is deputized because they have the knowledge, they have the geographical proximity, they have the means to execute things that the principles themselves are not capable of doing, right? It's why the principle-agent problem is a problem, because how are the principles going to make sure that their agents are properly executing their delegated authority? They can't.

I think that there's something to be said for thinking about populism as being inchoate, because part of the problem is that the principles lack information. They lack the expertise. They lack time. They're not specialists in politics, so they can't sit down and look through tax law and figure out how they're getting screwed. They just have this sort of vague sense that they're getting screwed. And it makes them susceptible to hucksters.

CHERYL W. THOMPSON: Donald Trump going after fake news means that he's going after the elite media, you know, the big papers and the networks. Would that include *Fox News*? How does *Fox News* survive the populist critique?

JAY COST: I think *Fox News* is an example of a network that is savvy in understanding the sentiment of its viewers. If you go back to 2012, for instance, *Fox News* was partial to Mitt Romney, and

I think that over the course of Obama's second term, *Fox News* made an editorial turn to get out in front of this percolating thing. And as a conservative writer, who doesn't watch *Fox News* and doesn't listen to talk radio, I missed it. They were catching this vibe, and I didn't see it coming until Trump came down the escalator. But, I think there was something very strategic about what they were doing during that period of time to get out in front of this. I mean, Andrew Breitbart would not have been a Trump guy, but when Breitbart died, the organization was sort of up in the air and Bannon and the Mercers get in charge of it, and they catch this populist fire. They caught it before a lot of us at *The Weekly Standard* and the *National Review* picked up on it.

ANDREW SELEE: When we think about fake news, the big story that dominated ten years ago was a fake story about Barack Obama as a Muslim who was born in Kenya. And 20 percent to 25 percent of the population believed that Obama was a Muslim born in Kenya. For the 20 percent to 25 percent of the population with whom that resonated, it goes back to the issue of race, and it goes back to the issue of immigration, and it goes back perhaps to a sense of America's place in the world. We're immune to actual information, right? I mean, on one side there may be part of the population for whom things have become so emotionally charged that expertise doesn't really matter and facts don't really matter, and I think it's worth taking that into account. There's a level of angst that then makes some people impenetrable to actual factual conversations.

The other issue is that we deliver expertise in the same way we've always delivered expertise. We write 30-page papers, or we write really dense books, or occasionally when we're feeling really agile, we'll write a policy memo that's four pages long because we know how to distill things. The concerns that people actually have out there is not something think tanks are well set up to address.

I think there's also the broader question of how we deliver expertise. One of the things I think we struggle with is the ability to tell stories, and I think we are really ambivalent about whether we even want to tell stories, right, or is it enough simply to give people facts? I think for many of us who are in the expertise business, we're uncomfortable moving beyond numbers and facts—we think that should speak for itself. We depend

on journalists to tell the stories for us. We'll talk to a journalist, and let them weave the story, but we're going to give them the facts that they can weave into it. But, I think many of us are starting to wonder whether we should also think about being storytellers—not straying from the facts, but building narratives around the facts and sharing information that is more consumable, like infographics.

JACK HAMILTON: When Walter Lippman wrote *Public Opinion*, he said that the solution was a bureau of experts who would help the public decide. There was this naïve view that if people just got the facts they would come to the right answer. But, is it also possible to say that we've strayed from the idea of think tanks that were trying to get the facts to the public so they would know the right answers, to think tanks that are really propagandists.

ANDREW SELEE: I don't think it's bad that some think tanks are partisan, I mean, thank God that we actually have thinking going on in our political parties, thank God there's thinking in the labor movement and there's thinking in the business community—we want political and social movements to have thinking organisms tied to them, right? But, in the end, I think there is a confusion about what is and what isn't objective.

TOM ROSENSTIEL: Think tanks of certain generations were designed to be part of the political center, like Brookings, but the newer think tanks actually grew up to rebel against that—to be part of the political edges—as if there is such a thing as a populist think tank.

ANDREW SELEE: The think tanks that have come up in the past 15 or 20 years are much more single issue based or they're tied to an interest group of some sort of political current.

LARA BROWN: I had a conversation with Pat Caddell about a year ago, who was Jimmy Carter's pollster; he is somebody who has followed these Populist Democrats into the Trump phenomenon and he believes that the rise in distrust with the media and fake news began with Obama, and his point was that the mainstream media were much too easy on Obama. They didn't make all that much about him letting Assad cross the red line on using chemical weapons and letting Putin annex Crimea. They pointed to scan-

dals that happened in Obama's administration that never went up to the presidency itself. They were isolated at the VA or at the Secret Service or at the Health and Human Services. And he said that you could literally see in the survey polling that people started to believe the fake narrative about Obama, because they felt that the mainstream media narrative was false.

There was a reaction among some blue-collar white voters who had been traditionally Democrat and they said, "Look, the mainstream media is just doing Barack Obama's bidding." Then this completely outlandish alternative, of him being a Muslim or being born elsewhere, starts to become almost something like a validation for those individuals. After the Clintons were basically called racist in that primary in 2008, a lot of other people got very nervous about what they said about Barack Obama for fear of being labeled a racist. At some level, racism is never far from the conversation.

CHAPTER 3:
POLITICAL PARTIES AND FAKE NEWS

☰ What's Wrong with America's Political Parties? The Presence of Primaries, and the Absence of 'Pork,' Party Money, and Privacy

Elaine C. Kamarck

One of the many reasons fake news exists is that Americans love to hate political parties. Their cynicism is so deep and pervasive that they are willing to believe the worst about politicians in the opposite party.

This is not new. Our Founding Fathers didn't much like political parties either. Since then, however, every functional democracy in the world has developed political parties. Why? Political parties organize policies and opinions into general philosophies which help busy citizens make informed choices. Do you think government should be small and perform a minimum of functions? Vote for Republicans. Do you think government should provide a substantial safety net? Vote for Democrats. Despite their bad reputation, political parties play an essential role in organizing legislative life and setting the policy agenda. So, for all the bad-mouthing Americans heap on political parties the fact is that they are central to the functioning of our democracy.

So, what's the problem? We can't seem to govern anymore because of extreme polarization. If one party says black the other automatically says white. But does ideological distance have to mean governmental dysfunction? Whatever happened to negotiation and compromise?

To most people the problem with politics is politics; they want less of the backroom deal making and insider political positioning and instead hope for some utopian world where everyone puts the party label behind them. But something else has happened to make 21st century governance so ungovernable. The problem with our politics today is the weakness of the institutional parties. The tools politicians have traditionally used to move from ideology to governing have been taken away from them.

When John Boehner (R-OH) resigned in 2015, he was only the fifth Speaker of the House to resign in the middle of his term in 226 years. Part of the reason for his departure was the unruly Tea Party members of the Republican Caucus who would not permit him to compromise. *The Hill* headline said it all: "GOP Plagued by Tea Party Monster It Created."¹ Three years later, the consensus choice to replace Boehner, Congressman Paul Ryan, (R-WI) announced his resignation.

One might think that there were enormous numbers of Tea Party members in the House Republican Caucus. But in fact, at any given point

1 Stephanie Schriock, "GOP plagued by Tea Party monster in created," *The Hill*, October 29, 2015, <http://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/politics/258456-gop-plagued-by-tea-party-monster-it-created>.

in time the Tea Party caucus and its successor, the Freedom caucus, constituted substantially less than 50 percent of the overall Republican Caucus. When the Tea Party hit the Republican Party like a bomb, the 2011 caucus in the House of Representatives had approximately 60 Tea Party members out of 242 Republicans—less than 25 percent of the total. The Freedom caucus counted 36 members in 2015—about 15 percent of the 247 House Republicans Caucus.²

Exactly why did such a small number of bomb throwers manage to control the entire Republican party in the House, making negotiation and compromise (legislative governance as we knew it) nearly impossible? Or, put another way, why was the legislative tail able to wag the dog?

Boehner became Speaker at a point in time when four different reform ideas interacted in ways that made his job impossible. In 2015, Jonathan Rauch of Brookings wrote a small book that offered a novel idea. Noting that the country today seems more dysfunctional and more polarized than ever he asked “What if idealistic reform itself is a culprit?” The title of the book—*Political Realism: How Hacks, Machines, Big Money and Back Room Deals Can Strengthen American Democracy*—was intentionally provocative.³ Rauch laid out how recent reformers have waged war on transactional politics—something professional political operatives are skilled in, while amateurs regard transactional politics as deviation from ideological purity. This outsider attack on insider politics has produced disdain for political parties and opened the door to those willing to believe in the more extreme versions of fake news. As parties have weakened so have the tools available to political leaders. Hence weak parties give us weak governance, more distrust in the system, and more susceptibility to fake news.

Reform efforts in the following four areas—primaries, pork, party money, and privacy—have weakened political parties.

The United States is one of the very few democracies in the world that uses primaries to nominate the members of the legislative branch.

2 Shannon Travis, “Who is the Tea Party Caucus in the House?” *CNN*, July 29, 2011, <http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2011/07/29/who-is-the-tea-party-caucus-in-the-house/>. Drew Desilver, “What is the House Freedom Caucus, and who’s in it?” *Pew Research Center*, October 20, 2015, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/10/20/house-freedom-caucus-what-is-it-and-whos-in-it/>.

3 Jonathan Rauch, *Political Realism: How Hacks, Machines, Big Money, and Back-Room Deals Can Strengthen American Democracy* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2015).

In abdicating the power to nominate to almost anyone who wishes to vote in a primary, political parties have given away two very powerful tools: the ability to exert their judgment as to the electability and competence of the candidates and their ability to exert control over members in order to encourage party unity on tough votes.

Even though party leaders lost control of the nomination process, for a while they retained certain other tools of leadership which helped them convince members of their caucus to go along with negotiated compromises. Chief among those was congressional “pork” otherwise known as earmarks. A congressman caught “compromising” with the enemy could more easily face the angry primary voters at home if he or she came brandishing money for a new senior center or library. In turn, leadership could more easily persuade members of the caucus to support less than ideologically pure legislation if they were able to deliver something tangible to the district. The existence of pork helped Congress do their business for many years. And yet, too many bridges to nowhere outraged the public. By the time the 110th Congress convened in 2007 earmarks were getting such bad publicity that a series of congressional actions were taken that essentially ended the practice. Since 2011 earmarks have been obsolete and so was a major tool for overcoming congressional differences in the interest of progress and compromise.

Even though American political parties have lost the power to nominate, and even though congressional leaders have lost the ability to hand out pork, they used to be in control of significant amounts of money which could be used to advance a candidacy in the general election. But here too, a series of well-intended campaign finance laws and a Supreme Court decision have had the effect of making political parties bit players in a world where billionaires put enormous amounts of money into elections—especially primaries.⁴

Previous Speakers could dispense party money, and that gave them some control over the behavior of their members. Speaker Boehner had to share or cede control over campaign cash to the likes of David and Charles Koch, Sheldon Adelson, and other assorted billionaires. Democratic leaders have had to do the same with George Soros, Tom Steyer, and others. In the 21st century, outside groups substantially outspend

4 Darrell M. West, *Billionaires: Reflections on the Upper Crust* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2014).

political parties in elections. Data from a paper by Jonathan Rauch and Ray La Raja illustrates how the relative financial contributions of state political parties in election years are dwarfed by the contributions of outside interest groups.

This too was the result of well-intentioned reform. In 2002, Congress passed the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act, otherwise known as McCain-Feingold, after the two U.S. Senators, John McCain (R-AZ) and Russ Feingold (D-WI) who sponsored it. One unintended consequence of the law was that outside money rushed in to replace party money—increasing the amount of unaccountable “dark” money in politics.

Finally, well-intentioned reformers brought transparency to the legislative “sausage making” of democracy. In the 1970s Congress passed a series of sunshine laws affecting committee meetings and the House floor. These laws, according to scholars Sarah Binder and Frances Lee, have proven to be a “double-edged sword.”⁵ Rather than increasing respect for Congress, greater openness appears to have had just the opposite effect. After seeing how the sausage is made, the public’s approval of Congress is at historically low levels.

But perhaps more important is the fact that a certain degree of secrecy is necessary to any successful negotiation. “Transparency,” writes Binder and Lee, “often imposes direct costs on successful deal making.”⁶ It increases the chances that lawmakers will adhere to the party line, especially when the television cameras are on. Members of Congress are especially attentive to their primary voters, who happen to be staunch partisans.

The four P’s—primaries, party money, privacy, and pork—have, in the name of reform, made it increasingly difficult for political parties to govern effectively. What’s wrong with political parties today is not that they are too strong but that they are *institutionally* too weak. The irony is that this has occurred as the electorate has become more ideologically partisan and polarized than at any time in the twentieth century. Polarization among the public makes it even more important for party leaders to have effective tools to conduct negotiations and create com-

5 Sarah A. Binder and Frances E. Lee, “Making Deals in Congress,” in *Political Negotiation: A Handbook*, ed. Jane Mansbridge and Cathie Jo Martin, (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015). Accessed at: <http://www.apsanet.org/portals/54/Files/Task%20Force%20Reports/Chapter3Mansbridge.pdf>.

6 Ibid, 63.

promises. If they don't get some of those tools back we are doomed to suffer through years of periodic government shutdowns and a continued inability to deal with urgent problems.

Despite their poor standing, political parties are more transparent, more regulated, and more likely to care about their reputation in the long run than are the secretive and often fleeting "Super PACs" run by billionaires with run amok egos. It is time to institutionally strengthen political parties and mitigate the unintended consequences of anti-party reforms. A political system that can produce positive outcomes is a political system in which fake news will have less credibility.

🗨️ ‘Fake News’ and Party Reform

David Karol response

I am pleased to be in dialogue with Elaine Kamarck, whose distinguished career in party politics gives her a unique perspective. I share her concerns about the state of our political system, including the rise of fake news, and her claim that parties are vital for democracy is on the mark. Though I find many of Dr. Kamarck’s proposals reasonable, they seem unlikely to stem the rise of fake news, and their impact on governance is apt to be limited. The cynical partisanship that makes Americans receptive to fake news has other roots.

Dr. Kamarck is correct that primaries complicate the task of party leaders, but the creation of primaries a century ago cannot explain the polarization trend or the recent rise of the Freedom Caucus and the resulting destabilization of the GOP congressional leadership. While primaries were of limited importance in the presidential nomination process prior to 1972, they have been binding in most congressional elections since the Progressive Era.

Earmarks once helped congressional leaders win majorities for legislation, and they may be the lesser evil if the alternative is gridlock. Yet, it’s not clear that today’s members of congress would be willing to risk being branded as sell-outs in exchange for some pork.

Similarly, privacy is no doubt helpful for negotiators, yet elected officials have to want to make a deal which they will ultimately own. When negotiations have collapsed in recent years on Capitol Hill the unwillingness to cast a tough vote has been the problem, more than the inability of leaders to craft compromises.

Reforming campaign finance law to allow party committees to receive larger donations and spend more on behalf of their preferred candidates also seem unlikely to appreciably strengthen party leaders. “Establishment” candidates defeated in recent years, including Rep. Eric Cantor (R-VA), Sen. Luther Strange (R-AL), and Rep. Joe Crowley (D-NY), were far better-funded than their challengers.¹ Incumbents seldom have trouble raising money and party leaders now spend vast sums to aid their favored candidates through their own Super PACs. If insurgents gain enough funding and attention to be visible, hapless incumbents will be in danger no matter how much is spent on their behalf. Changes in

1 Byron Tau and Tarini Parti, “How Big Money Failed Eric Cantor,” *Politico*, June 14, 2014. Michael Beckel, “The Money Behind Alabama’s Special U.S. Senate Election,” *Issueone.org*, September 22, 2017. David Weigel, “Rep. Joe Crowley defeated by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez,” *Washington Post*, June 26, 2018.

campaign finance laws are less influential than the rise of social media in the empowerment of outside challengers. There is little reason to believe that allowing party leaders to direct funds through party committees rather than Super PACs would alter the balance of power meaningfully.

I also question the definition of party-aligned donors like the Koch brothers, Sheldon Adelson, and George Soros as “outside groups.” Parties have long been animated by interest groups and activists my co-authors and I term “policy demanders.”² Labor unions have had an informal role in the Democrats’ nomination process since the time of Franklin Roosevelt.³ The Christian right and the NRA have been strongly aligned with the GOP since the Reagan years, impelling many political aspirants to change their positions on key issues.⁴ In an era of massive economic inequality, billionaires’ importance may have increased, yet the importance of wealthy donors in both parties is nothing new.

One under-appreciated source of polarization is the increased incorporation of policy-seeking groups in party coalitions. Forty years ago, the NRA and religious right were not core elements of the GOP, and environmentalists, LGBT, and feminist groups were not yet part of the Democratic establishment. This trend along with the demise of the Southern Democrats of old and the emergence of the Republicans as the party of white backlash helped bring us to this place. Additionally, the rise of social and partisan media has also helped far-right and far-left insurgents raise money and gain attention. This is a new reality that cannot be reversed by tinkering with party rules or statutes.

I agree with Dr. Kamarck that Americans’ receptivity to fake news is related to their willingness “to believe the worst about politicians in the opposite party.” The key word in that sentence is “opposite.” Abramowitz and Webster show that “negative partisanship” has grown in recent years, meaning that voters are no fonder of their preferred party, but

2 Martin Cohen, David Karol, Hans Noel and John Zaller, *The Party Decides: Presidential Nominations Before and After Reform* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012). Kathleen Bawn, Martin Cohen, David Karol, Seth Masket, Hans Noel and John Zaller, “A Theory of Political Parties: Groups, Policy Demands and Nominations in American Politics,” *Perspectives on Politics*, 10 (2012).

3 David Karol, “Parties and Leadership in American Politics” in *Leadership in American Politics*, ed. Jeffery A. Jenkins and Craig Volden (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2017).

4 David Karol, *Party Position Change in American Politics: Coalition Management* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

they are far more hostile toward the opposing party.⁵

This trend stems less from governance failures than the evolution of party coalitions. Both major parties are more clearly aligned with specific social groups than they were decades ago, when Congress was less polarized. Voters can now more readily identify parties with racial, religious, and gender identities about which they have strong opinions. Given a clearer idea of what the parties are about and whose interests they serve, most voters consistently favor one party far more than they did a generation ago. If it is mistrust of the other side that nurtures fake news, then measures that strengthen Congressional leaders are unlikely to mitigate the problem.

Just as it is easier to describe a problem than it is to solve it, it is easier to criticize reform proposals than it is to devise better ones. Yet a clear understanding of conditions is a crucial first step before we can craft effective solutions or, more modestly, develop coping mechanisms to move the wheels of government in a polarized nation.

5 Alan I. Abramowitz and Steven W. Webster, “Negative Partisanship,” *Advances in Political Psychology*, 39 (2018). See also Lilita Mason, *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

Discussion on Political Parties and Fake News

ELAINE KAMARCK: First of all, party cohesion in the electorate is very strong. Only eight percent of Republicans voted for Clinton, only eight percent of Democrats voted for Trump, and probably half of those people were stoned when they went in to vote and made a mistake. Party cohesion in Congress is very strong, and has been growing since the South stopped being the solid Democratic South and the two parties realigned.

My thesis is that the institutional parties are so weak that they cannot fulfill their traditional role in the process of governing, and what I want to talk about is the party and its role in governing. It's not that the messaging aspects of political parties are a problem. Parties today are pretty clear. The platforms are very different. But, the very tools that politicians traditionally use to govern have been taken away from them. I call them the four Ps—primaries, pork, party money, and privacy. Of course, you all remember the superdelegate whohaha. The notion that members of Congress and party leaders might have a legitimate say in who the nominee of their party is, is considered by a large part of the electorate as not only illegitimate but evidence of a rigged system. What is new is what various political scientists have called the "Incredible Shrinking Swing Seat." There is a very small number of swing seats—an estimated 55 in this upcoming election. What this means is that, in many races, the only way somebody gets beat is in the primary—to get "primaried." So, what's happened is that the wings of the parties—be it the far right or the far left—have control over members of Congress in a way that they never had before. The red parts of the country have gotten redder in the past couple of decades, and the blue parts have gotten bluer. The tools that political parties have had historically for making deals—for making government work—are really not in existence anymore, and we have a political system that is widely regarded as dysfunctional.

DAVID KAROL: I agree with what was said about there being party elites having a legitimacy problem. In other countries, to participate in a party primary election, you have to be a dues-paying member. "I have to pay money to vote?" By American context, that's like a poll tax—"how horrible." But, Justin Trudeau, who people sin-

cerely love, was elected by dues-paying members. It's not a lot of money, but there's this understanding that a party is a private voluntary organization.

Having said that, I think it's important to think about what the problem is. Elaine says the problem is governance. But, when you look at the Freedom Caucus and the problems that it caused Boehner and Ryan, that's not a lack of party cohesion. In the days of Carl Albert or John McCormack as Speaker, they had huge party divisions. In those days, committee chairmanships were entirely based on seniority. The chairs did not have to listen to the leadership at all. That has changed. When Rahm Emanuel was the chairman of the DCCC, he recruited Blue Dogs to win some seats, but in terms of government it was a mixed bag because a lot of those people wouldn't vote for things Emanuel wanted. But, he wanted to get the majority, and that highlights the fact that the formal party structures are oriented for protecting incumbents and winning majorities. They're not policy-oriented. They're not a big party discipline tool. We've had primaries since the Progressive Era. If you look at these statistics, which are definitely flawed, there was actually a decline in party cohesion in Congress during the period after primaries were created. So, we've had primaries without party machines for a long time, including the time that Congress was running very differently.

ELAINE KAMARCK: I just want to make one point that I think political scientists often miss—yes, there were primaries in the Progressive era. But, what were those primaries? Were Congressional candidates on the ballot? No. Presidential candidates weren't even on the ballot. Those primaries, to the extent that they existed—and they existed in well under 50 percent of the states—had convention delegates on the ballot. Up until the '70s you had a caucus convention system for nominations. I think that the research in political science that treats primaries as a straight continuum from the Progressive Era to the present era is really not understanding what those primaries were like from the nineteen-teens all the way until the '70s. You had to be a real insider.

MICHAEL CORNFIELD: We've got a terribly important and intricate problem with party performance, and we've got fake news. And in the middle, we don't have the connected pylons yet.

TOM ROSENSTIEL: In the older media era, news organizations were pretty good at covering official dissent. We said we covered public debate, but we didn't, we covered establishment debate. And we also played gatekeeper over the stability of the discussion. What the information system does now is it allows people to say things publicly that they were saying in private. So, whatever ugly talk happened in the pool hall is now happening in public. So, it has a political impact, and fake news is another kind of fuel that can inflame it. You can measure who these people are by the things they look at, by the things they talk about.

LARA BROWN: I think the other connector with fake news is that there have always been factions within parties, and I would argue that part of this problem is that as the institutional strength of the ruling faction of each party has weakened, it has allowed both parties to create and generate fake news in service of whatever debate they're trying to win. So, in other words the faction that is in power has less power than they used to have. They cannot be effective gatekeepers. The overall discord is now more out in the open, and technology allows it to be more open.

HEIDI TWOREK: The best chance of winning a primary is to gain visibility and candidates can do that by being as outlandish as possible, which incentivizes fake news or extremes because that's how they get covered.

PAUL MILHAILIDIS: I think about the sophisticated media infrastructure of the alternative fringe groups. The party leaders, to sow doubts, go back to the populist kind of nostalgia. But how much do they actually need the mainstream press? I actually have a critique of the mainstream press, because they're now competing with these alternative sub-groups that aren't journalists per se—they're citizens that control really powerful self-driven communication infrastructures that can be as powerful as the mainstream media. What the mainstream press does with everything from the dentist who killed the lion in Africa to Pizzagate, is they all pick up on it because they're competing against this really active sub-group. And so, they become complicit in sowing the seed of discord.

ELAINE KAMARCK: Well, I would kind of turn that a little bit on its head and say that if you're looking at why the parties have stopped governing and engaging in negotiation and compromise, one of the reasons is because the fringe groups perpetrating fake news have the capacity to take anything that they say and use it against them in a primary. They fear being "primaried." And there is no counter from the party to protect the legislator who does his or her job and genuinely goes into negotiations and tries to work out an alternative to Obamacare, for example. So, factions can go out and get a lot of attention for themselves, but the problem comes when that interferes with the very process of negotiating legislation and the very process of governance.

In America, factions have to fight for power within parties. In a parliamentary system or proportional system, factions have to fight to be part of the coalition to get enough attention to get enough seats to be part of an eventual coalition. But, in both instances, the use of outrageous stories and fake news is a very handy tool that we didn't have prior to this era.

DAVID KARPFF: I'm reminded of a line from Hemingway. When asked how do you go bankrupt, he said, "Slowly at first, and then all at once." The thing that's striking me about both this paper and a lot of this conversation is that we've been discussing the slowly at first problem. I think we would be having a similar discussion on the same slow-burning problems within American politics, but the theme of this conference would be different in a Marco Rubio administration or a Hillary Clinton administration or a Jeb Bush administration. I think there's also a set of all-at-once problems. When we're talking about fake news in this populist moment where populism is showing up in all these other countries, I think what we're trying to tap into is something distinct that is happening, layered on top of these broader problems with our party structure.

My personal thought is that democracies are fragile and that you end up with an odd black swan situation. Back in 2015, if political scientists and Republicans got together and said, "Let's discuss what it would take for Donald Trump to become president," they would all laugh you out of the room. The "black swan" event is not only due to changes in the media systems. It not only rides on populism, but also is the result of having 16 candidates or so, and the second-place candidate is Ted Cruz,

who all the other candidates don't like enough, so they say "Let's just wait it out instead of endorsing him because we can't endorse him, and then I'll be the next guy." You need all of those things layered on top to get this weird event that we're now in, and then in that weird event, we have a new set of problems.

LARA BROWN: But, I would just argue that Elaine's getting at the problem of ambition. The parties can't control candidate ambition now, so you have fringe candidates talking about how parties are bad. Both Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders spent a substantial amount of the primary nomination time talking about it being a rigged system. So, the populism problem is the elite problem, which allows factions to create fake news that serves their benefit and hurts political institutions.

ANDREW SELEE: I agree with the black swan argument. If this were a parliamentary system Donald Trump would be Marine Le Pen with 20 percent to 25 percent of Parliament. He would not have taken over an entire party and then a majority. There are three strands that we keep talking about here. One is the change in media patterns and how we consume information—the balkanization of how we get information and the loss of mediation in media. The second is the loss of political parties' ability to be real mediators. And the third thing is that people far from power have some real concerns. Some of their ideas are unseemly and wrong, but the reality is that the world is changing really quickly around us and people are worried about losing their jobs. They're worried about demographic change. The world was upended and they want to make America, or France, Denmark—choose your country—great again. There is this nostalgia for the past in societies that are changing really quickly, and that's when the populists want to turn things back to the past.

SID MILKIS: I think this kind of a loss of mediation in combination with the presidentialism of our system have contributed to a dramatic change. I've been thinking a lot about the differences between 1940 and 2016. In 1940, we had the first America First Movement. This poster child was Charles Lindbergh, and I heard Lindbergh give a speech, blaming our move toward World War II on a triad of Roosevelt, the UK, and Jews. My grandfather would have been very interested to know Jews were so power-

ful. Talk about fake news. But, if we had today's political system, as Elaine described in her paper, in 1940, Lindbergh would have been a serious candidate for the Republican nomination. But, the convention system was still strong, so they withstood his challenge and Wendell Willkie was nominated instead. If you had Lindbergh instead of Willkie running in 1940, history might have been very different. In 2016, the convention system was so weak that even though I think a lot of the delegates would have liked to stand against Trump, they didn't feel that they could do that.

CHAPTER 4:
TECHNOLOGY AND FAKE NEWS

☰ The Psychology and Economics of Fake News on Social Media

Ryan Thornburg

The internet did not create fake news and it did not make people more susceptible to believing in fiction masquerading as fact. But inexpensive digital production and network distribution technologies have allowed fake news to become more widely consumed.

The financial costs of producing the news have always influenced the types of messages that reached an audience. Before the internet, the capital cost of owning a printing press or a broadcast license limited the choices for audiences and advertisers alike. The mass media business relied on providing a single product that was at least interesting—if not always palatable—to the widest audience possible. Some outlets—like the *National Enquirer*—catered to audiences that enjoyed fake news as well as the advertisers that wanted to reach those audiences. Other outlets catered to audiences that were interested in facts. Trying to serve both customer segments risked losing one of them.

The rapid expansion of the internet in the late 1990s seemed to satisfy a pent-up demand that Americans had for more diverse viewpoints.¹ Low-cost media gave rise to a more robust marketplace of ideas, but they also lead to an increase in fake news. The lower cost of digital design tools, along with open standards like HTML, made it easier for news entrepreneurs, political dissidents, and fraudsters alike to mimic the design of incumbent news brands from *ABC News* to your hometown newspaper.

Rather than merely put fact and fraud on equal footing, technology gave a leg up to fake news over evidence-based journalism. Media production and distribution costs are lower than 20 years ago, but the cost of finding and verifying facts is just as high. A local newspapers' reporting on a single story about problems at a statewide government agency can take more than six months to produce and cost more than

1 A 1996 survey by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press found that 53 percent of Americans who went online for election news in the very first online presidential campaign said they did so because they did not get all the news and information they wanted from traditional news sources. And non-traditional news sources were preferred by about half of the people who went online for news that year. Republicans were more likely than Democrats to seek online election news that they said “reflected their values.” “One-in-Ten Voters Online For Campaign '96: News Attracts Most Internet Users,” *Pew Research Center for The People & The Press*, December 16, 1996, <http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/legacy-pdf/117.pdf>.

\$200,000.² By contrast, an entire fake news site can be run for \$48,000 over the same six-month period.³

But nobody would spend a dime running a fake news site if there weren't an audience for it. Many Americans abhor fake news, but many also patronize it. One reason they patronize it, psychology research tells us, is that we often prefer information that supports rather than challenges our existing beliefs and preferences. At the same time, several recent studies have shown that people often don't even realize when they are consuming fraudulent journalism. Because online news consumers can move without friction from site to site they are often agnostic and even ignorant about who is creating the media they consume. Almost half of Americans say they get news on Facebook,⁴ but half of them say they can't recall the sources of information they see on the social network.⁵ Fake news is even more realistic because it appears on content aggregation services like Facebook and Google side by side with the journalism it's trying to mimic.

While changes in digital *production* technology made the creation of fake news cheaper than the creation of evidence-based journalism, it was *network* technology innovations and the shift of gatekeeping from elite human editors to automated algorithms based largely on audience behavior that allowed the consumption of fake news to increase.

Networked media distribution led to two forms of disaggregation that created an opening for fake news to spread. Mass media companies that were once vertically and horizontally integrated businesses have been disintegrated online. That disintegration has in turn caused advertising that supported expensive fact-based news reporting to become

2 Abbie Bennett, "Power of investigative journalism is celebrated in new book and Raleigh event," *The News & Observer*, March 24, 2017, <http://www.newsobserver.com/news/local/article140602428.html>.

3 John Herrman, "Inside Facebook's (Totally Insane, Unintentionally Gigantic, Hyperpartisan) Political-Media Machine," *The New York Times Magazine*, August, 24, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/28/magazine/inside-facebooks-totally-insane-unintentionally-gigantic-hyperpartisan-political-media-machine.html>.

4 Elizabeth Dvoskin, Caitlin Dewey, Craig Timberg, "Why Facebook and Google are Struggling to Purge Fake News," *The Washington Post*, November 15, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/why-facebook-and-google-are-struggling-to-purge-fake-news/2016/11/15/85022897-f765-422e-9f53-c720d1f20071_story.html.

5 Amy Mitchell, Elisa Shearer, Jeffrey Gottfried and Kristine Lu, "How Americans Encounter, Recall And Act Upon Digital News," *Pew Research Center*, February 9, 2017, <http://www.journalism.org/2017/02/09/part-ii-characteristics-of-news-instances/>.

decoupled from journalism it once supported.

At the turn of the century, Google (and others) began offering digital publishers the ability to generate revenue from unsold online advertising inventory with minimal effort. Publishers would place a bit of code on their sites, and Google would insert an ad. Unlike in print production, the advertising content and journalism content of a page could come from completely different sources.

Google and Facebook alone control more than half of the \$107 billion U.S. digital advertising market, and they share some of that revenue with both phony and legitimate news companies. News sites—both legitimate and fake—allow Google (and other companies) to place ads on their pages in exchange for a percentage of the revenue. The legitimacy or fraudulence of a news site is often undetected by the advertiser or Google. Nonetheless, this kind of ad delivery technology allows companies like Google to generate revenue off fake news as well as share some of that revenue with the fraudsters. In 2016, some fake news sites bragged about making as much as \$30,000 a month. Google flourishes by placing ads next to content it did not create and Facebook flourishes by distributing content it did not create. The two sites generate about 80 percent of traffic to news sites in the United States.⁶ Most fake news sites wouldn't survive without Google and Facebook, and many legitimate sites wouldn't either. The disaggregation of mass media means that Facebook and Google are able to earn revenue from fake news without sacrificing the revenue they earn from fact-based journalism.

Long before President Trump used the term “fake news” to describe CNN's factual reporting about an intelligence dossier on him, Facebook and Google were making efforts to combat all types of fraud, including fake news, on their platforms. Since the 2016 U.S. presidential election they have continued to do so. Despite criticism that their efforts have not been sufficient to protect and foster fact-based public discourse, the companies' customers appear to be satisfied enough that advertising revenue at both Google and Facebook continues to rise even as the prices of the companies' stock sometimes falter.

Google and Facebook have the challenge of cutting off attention and revenue to fraud sites without harming their own revenue or the reve-

⁶ Mathew Ingram, “Facebook Has Taken Over From Google as a Traffic Source For News,” *Fortune*, August 18, 2015, <http://fortune.com/2015/08/18/facebook-google/>.

nues of fact-based sites. To do this, both companies have favored technological solutions that largely rely on audience behavior to generate signals that are fed into algorithms intended to help determine fiction from fact. That means that no matter how sophisticated the artificial intelligence to combat fake news becomes, as long as the inputs for the algorithms that determine what Americans see on Facebook and Google are based in human behavior the solutions to the spread of fake news are more likely to be psychological than technological.

Companies and academic researchers are working on developing tools that would distinguish fraud from fact-based opinion, but for now those signals come from humans that are also often unable to tell the difference. In America's largest newsrooms, investments in computational journalism may one day lower the cost of finding and producing fact-based journalism and put it on more equal footing with the cost of creating fraudulent news reports, but when the newspaper industry is seeing revenue decline at five percent a year,⁷ those research and development costs will need to yield significant savings if they are to continue.

For now, the solution to fake news relies on increasing each American's ability to tell fraud from fact as well as their desire to do so.

⁷ Michael Barthel, "Newspaper Fact Sheet," *Pew Research Center*, June 13, 2018, <http://www.journalism.org/fact-sheet/newspapers/>.

🗨️ This Time, It's Business: The New Trouble with Fake News

David Karpf response

As Ryan Thornburg's essay highlights, fake news isn't new. But it is evolving. It is becoming different, more potent, worse. In this response, I want to echo a few of his points, but then suggest a different solution. I will argue that only Google and Facebook can fix it.

We have been concerned about fake news on the internet since the earliest days of the World Wide Web. In a January 1997 *WIRED* magazine column, Tom Dowe warned of "News You Can Abuse":

The Net is opening up new terrain in our collective consciousness, between old-fashioned "news" and what used to be called the grapevine—rumor, gossip, word of mouth. Call it *paranews*—information that looks and sounds like news, that might even be news. Or a carelessly crafted half-truth.... Like a finely tuned seismograph, an ever more sophisticated chain of Web links, email chains, and newsgroups is now in place to register the slightest tremor in the zeitgeist, no matter how small, distant, or far-fetched. And then deliver it straight to the desktop of anyone, anywhere.¹

Paranews in 1997 was essentially harmless, little worse than tabloid gossip or conspiracy theory newsletters. But that was because the *delivery mechanism* was still so limited. Paranews spread through email chains and newsgroups. One had to actively seek it out, actively choose to send it to the inboxes of peers and associates. There was no money in spreading paranews. There was no power in building a paranews empire.

A decade later, we had a different internet, an internet that was dominated by Google search rankings and the advertising-based financial boons those Google searches promised. It was an internet that presented greater rewards to producing junk news and fake news. Getting the story *first* was more important than getting the story *right*. Tapping into readers' innate curiosity could lead to clicks and links, which in turn boosted search rankings and profits.

In October 2009, also in *WIRED* magazine, Daniel Roth reported on Demand Media, "The fast, disposable, and profitable as hell media mod-

1 Tom Dowe, "News You Can Abuse," *Wired*, January 1, 1997, <https://www.wired.com/1997/01/netizen-6/>.

el.”² Demand Media was not part of the *fake* news industry, but it was the standard-bearer of its close cousin, the *junk* news industry. Demand Media manufactured over 4,000 stories and videos per day, all algorithmically tailored to dominate search results linked to profitable Google AdWords topics. Demand Media seemed like the dark, inevitable future of the news media. Then Google adjusted its search algorithm to penalize “content farms.” Demand Media’s business model never recovered.

In the past decade, we have moved from an internet defined by search to an internet defined by social sharing. According to the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 65 percent of digital news is now accessed through “side-door” methods (search, social media, mobile alerts, etc.) rather than through direct visits to a news website.³ Facebook now exerts a gravitational force, both through determining what news gets seen (via the newsfeed) and through determining which news sites make money (via its profitable advertising platform).

During the 2016 election, we collectively bore witness to the worst excesses of the Facebook-fake-news era. Teenagers in the Macedonian town of Veles have become emblematic of the problem. They created fake news websites, paid small dollars to increase their reach on social media, and earned tens of thousands of dollars in online advertising revenues.⁴ Their economic motivation was paired with the political motivation of the Internet Research Agency in St. Petersburg, Russia, which pays its employees to create thousands of fake accounts that help to spread lies and distortions as part of an active effort to shape and influence political news around the world.⁵

The near future of fake news in politics looks even more daunting than what we witnessed in 2016. As Henry Farrell and Rick Perlstein warned in a 2018 *New York Times* Op-Ed, we are fast approaching a point

2 Daniel Roth, “The Answer Factory: Demand Media And The Fast, Disposable, And Profitable As Hell Media Model,” *Wired*, October 19, 2009, https://www.wired.com/2009/10/ff_demandmedia/.

3 Antonis Kalogeropoulos and Nic Newman, “I Saw the News on Facebook,” *Reuters Institute Digital News Project*, 2017, <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2017-07/Brand%20attributions%20report.pdf>.

4 Samantha Subramanian, “Inside the Macedonian Fake-News Complex,” *Wired*, February 15, 2017, <https://www.wired.com/2017/02/veles-macedonia-fake-news/>.

5 Adrian Chen, “The Agency,” *New York Times Magazine*, June 2, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/07/magazine/the-agency.html>.

where so-called “deepfake” videos can cheaply and convincingly portray politicians doing and saying things they never did or said.⁶ Fake news has, up until now, been confined to writing online. It may soon expand to online audio and video.

Fake news has become such a problem today because of the economic and political incentives that support it. If we are going to confront this wave of fake news, and the next wave that is surely to come, then we are going to require active leadership from Google and Facebook.

This is where I slightly depart from Ryan Thornburg: citizens cannot fix this problem on our own—we cannot expect the mass public to constantly monitor and adapt to the latest trends in digital storytelling. If consumer demand for salacious stories changes, but the economic and political incentives remain unchanged, then the next wave of fake news will simply adapt and find new vulnerabilities to exploit. Government regulators must eventually play some role in this arena, but the digital news environment is currently too fluid for straightforward regulatory solutions.

Engineering decisions have manufactured the digital news environment. Engineering decisions have rewarded and then punished junk news. Engineering decisions made 2016’s fake news factories profitable, and then made decisions that undermined the Macedonian fake news industry.

Fake news can never be eliminated, but it can potentially be reduced back to the scale of 1997’s “paranews.” Since the fake news industry responds to the political and economic opportunities that Facebook and Google engineers create, it is Facebook and Google that will have to play a central role in reducing the scale and potency of the industry moving forward.

6 Henry J. Farrell and Rick Perlstein, “Our Hackable Political Future,” *The New York Times*, February 4, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/04/opinion/hacking-politics-future.html>.

Discussion on Technology and Fake News

RYAN THORNBURG: When I think about technology and fake news and where we are at in this moment and what it means for journalism, I think about what first drew me to the internet, which was this idea that it would be this democratizing force. The old adage was that press freedom belonged to anyone who owned a printing press—with the dawn of the internet age, everybody owned one. The internet offered an opportunity for a lot of voices that weren't being heard to finally be heard. The belief that I had at the time was that the answer to bad speech was always more speech—a traditional journalistic approach to things. And I also somehow had gotten the idea that if you just gave people the facts, they would sort of find their way. For the first 10 years, it felt like the internet is going to be great and social media is going to be great, and everything is going to be great. I sort of look back on the last 10 years and go, “Rut-roh, what happened?” And I think a lot of it has to do with the things that I wish that I knew when I started looking at the internet. I wish I knew more about psychology, and I wish I knew more about economics, because these are the things that are driving [the internet]. I had no understanding of the advertising industry. I understood that there was going to be this sort of limitless supply of spaces to put advertising, but I didn't fully understand the economics of media.

So, when we talk about technology and fake news, a lot of it has to be around the psychology of fake news and how the technology is affecting the way that we think about things as well as the economics of fake news and how that drives things. The internet transforms speed, time, and space, and this is a real challenge when it comes to fake news. The fact-checking movement that's been growing, it's a very traditional journalistic approach to just point out the errors and expect that people will appreciate that and see the errors. But, people are seeing information at such a fast pace and there's good psychological evidence to suggest that the part of the brain that processes a claim is not the same part of the brain where skepticism is generated. And so, the speed at which people are consuming fake news—you just cannot keep up with it. You cannot fact-check everything. You're not going to get in front of it. So, what is

the prescription? How does the technology help us and how can speed in technology work as a solution toward fake news?

Regarding the cost of publishing, the same thing that made the internet democratic makes it very easy to create fake news. I am not talking about lying, I'm not talking about, "There were more people at my inauguration than ever in history," or "I did not have sexual relations with that woman"—that's not fake news, that's just lying. Fake news is the wrapper that the lie comes in. And in order for fake news to be effective, it has to look legitimate, and it has to have a kernel of truth to it. Or at least a fraud that has a kernel of truth is going to be more effective than something that isn't based on anybody's sense of reality or what they hope reality is going to be. It's really cheap to create sites that look like legitimate news sites, and this is really challenging for legitimate news.

It's not just that fake news looks real. It's not just that it can travel quickly. It's that you can target messages and not be seen. And that's, you know, again not a new challenge. There have always been political mailers and door knocking and other things that sort of fly under the radar. But, if you look down the list of identified Russian trolls on Twitter they were named things like "Houston Top News," and "San Diego Today." A lot of the fake news sites were meant to look like a news site that's in a local community. And that's a great strategy because it's much harder to mimic *The Washington Post* or *The New York Times* than it is to mimic *The Chatham News*. And so, the folks in Saint Petersburg clearly saw value in pretending that they were local news and designing sites that looked like local news. In Nashville, they just had a transportation bond vote and one of the sides of the debate created a fake person and used them in an ad they put in the newspaper. And this shouldn't have been new to them because one of the Russian troll accounts was "tn_gop." It looked like the Tennessee GOP's Twitter account, and it wasn't. Twitter didn't do anything about it. The Tennessee Republican Party knew about it. They were like "Man, this is not good, this is not us, but we don't know who it is." And so, you start to see the different ways that fake accounts and fake media can infiltrate local news. As local news pulls back, is fake news filling a void in people's attention? Or is it creating its own sort of demand? Is fake news spreading because it gives people what they want to

hear? Is it generating more demand and more attention or is it filling a space that legitimate news would have occupied?

TOM ROSENSTIEL: Local television news is the most trusted, but it is on the decline. The exact numbers depend on which survey you're looking at, but, relative to other media, local TV news has long been the most trusted medium. The big structural change that is taking place is that basically nobody under 40 watches local television news.

RYAN THORNBURG: People say they hate journalists, but there is still political rhetorical value in the way that journalists present information. Otherwise, there wouldn't be fake news, right? It would just be lies. Putting fake news inside a journalistic presentation, is a sign that journalism has some legitimacy.

CHERYL W. THOMPSON: Ryan, do you think that fake news happens more in small rural towns, and, if it does, is it because they are less educated? And, if that's the case, how do we eradicate it?

RYAN THORNBURG: I don't know the answer to that. I don't think it necessarily happens in smaller towns, but if you've got a void, that certainly creates an opportunity, right? So, any community that's not being spoken to by traditional media, and that might be a minority group in a city as well as a rural community, may have a void that fake news can fill. From what I understand, there's not a lot of evidence to suggest that more educated people are better at spotting fake news.

TOM ROSENSTIEL: I think it's important to understand how social media created the precondition that made fake news possible, which is we used to consume media under the auspices of a brand. You would go to *CBS News* or *NBC News* where you weren't going to encounter a fake story from a news organization that didn't exist the day before. But then news was atomized into the story level instead of coming from a brand. It might be that someone shared a picture of their kids and then they shared a news story. News came at you broken up from the brand, and the primary indicator of whether you looked at it was who shared it. This didn't happen until millennials and their parents and their grandparents all

got on social media—around 2015. That created the precondition for fake news to happen in a very different way than it did before. In social, you get whatever people share.

RYAN THORNBURG: If you ask students, “Where did you see that story? Where do you get your news?” They answer: “Facebook.” The brand is the platform that people get the news on. They are not aware of the content creation source. They are aware of the newsstand that the story sits in.

LARA BROWN: The corollary is music. In the past, you bought an album, and then people started to buy individual songs and now young people listen on Pandora. It’s like the whole experience is now atomized.

TOM ROSENSTIEL: The past of journalism was financed by advertising. The future, if there is one, at the moment is perceived to be in subscription. Most news organizations are looking at seven years out at virtually zero advertising revenue. *The New York Times* is already at 67 percent subscription revenue. The reason is that in mobile, which is the primary digital platform, Google and Facebook get 83 percent of all the ad revenue. So, it’s game over. That is going to lead to some change in the way that content is created. Already, *The New York Times*, which produces about 212 stories a day, says they want to reduce that number to about 140. They want to produce high-value stories that people will subscribe to, and not stories that no one reads. So, you’re going to see publications use data to figure out what the audience will pay for. They will move away from being the department store and essentially be specialty stores.

MATTHEW DALLEK: How much of a problem is fake news? Talk radio was of course around for a long time—even in the 1950s and ‘60s, there were dozens of books that you could go out and buy that would tell you that there was a communist conspiracy inside the schools or in the government. That was a kind of fake news. So, what I’m asking is, are fake news sites a more significant source of fake news then they were in the past?

TOM ROSENSTIEL: A lot of fake news is actually just taking things that are out there and adding velocity to them.

PAUL MILAILIDIS: The networks we know are designed to be extractive. They are designed to put like-minded people together, and they're designed to promote the most spectacular information, which people will share the most. When big news companies opted into these technological spaces, they played by the rules of tech companies. So, they no longer have control over the credibility of the environment their content appears in. And this has huge ramifications. There is advertising next to a sponsored *New York Times* story, next to my mother's breakfast. What responsibility do we put on these networks? Or is it the fault of the news organizations who opted into these things because that's where the eyeballs are?

RYAN THORNBURG: The news organizations are afraid to leave these platforms, because they look at the volume of traffic. But I suspect the most sophisticated news organizations understand that volume is not as valuable as somebody that's coming to your site and spending time there.

LEN APCAR: There is a 90/10 rule for the people who drink heavily at a website. Ten percent of your users—they would be the most loyal—account for 90 percent of your page views. It's that lopsided.

I harken back to a very clean example that was publicized by *The New York Times* of a 23-year-old who has some bills to pay and sits down and confects a story that says there are pre-marked ballots in Ohio for Hillary Clinton found in a warehouse by an electrician, and he goes and rips off a picture from Manchester, England of a guy standing next to a pallet with plastic storage boxes of marked ballots. He slaps the picture on his story and he puts it on a URL that he bought from a URL broker for five bucks called *Christian Newspaper Times*. Google news picks up the story, they put all sorts of goofy ads on the site for shoe cream and hair products, and he makes over \$20,000 confecting that story he created in 30 minutes and knowing full well that it was knocked down easily.

Fast forward to the Internet Research Agency—they don't just confect one story like this guy does. They build a constellation of fake sites. When they tried to pull this off in Louisiana, they had a You Tube site, a Wikipedia site, a Facebook page, and several other things that were built weeks before they had planned their bot attack.

I'm convinced there are many other Cambridge Analyticas out there raking in this data. The political consultants I know say they're not going anywhere near Facebook right now because it's too hot, it's under too much scrutiny so they go elsewhere to get their data.

PAUL MIHAILIDIS: The mass collection of demographics is leaving Facebook, and going to Google, Amazon, and Snapchat. But on Google, for example, when someone searches for a topic, Google does not discriminate between an alternative news platform and a so-called mainstream news outlet. It is all together. And if you knew how to extract their algorithm, you can get into the first page of Google with a high page rank or they just pay to get to the top of Google search. I bring in folks to my classes who work in digital marketing firms and create bots, and they show step-by-step how you can get a journalism story to go to the top of Google News, and there's no discrimination because that's what the platforms allow.

MICHAEL CORNFIELD: But it's not that strategic. I always have problems with the sentence "Trump knew what he was doing." As I understand it, the Trump campaign had a huge amount of computing power and ran experiment after experiment, and then whatever was getting clicks, they did more of that. So, they just used raw computing power. It's not as if they figured out the persuasion algorithm for 2016.

RYAN THORNBURG: I think Cambridge Analytica and these other services would like us to believe that they're magical wizards.

HEIDI TWOREK: Yeah, I think we have to be very skeptical of Cambridge Analytica's claims that are coming from Cambridge Analytica. They were very good at selling themselves, and one piece of evidence that points to this is the secretly filmed video where Alexander Nix says, "We can go in and basically do a honey trap." And then you think to yourself, "Okay, but why would they offer a technique from the Cold War if their data was so great?" They wouldn't need to do that. But what about all the hundreds of companies, individuals, and governments potentially doing exactly the same thing with Facebook data, which was allowed by Facebook. So, I see it as kind of a proof of concept. We've

made the discussion so far about open social, which is Facebook feeds and so on, but realistically dark social—things like WhatsApp—seems to be very important, at least with the way that news stories are being shared.

RYAN THORNBURG: And just email.

HEIDI TWOREK: Yeah, email. That is another way that the people are getting many of these decontextualized stories. I did a piece about how Twitter is the new vox pop because you can show very clearly how a journalist used Twitter to write reaction pieces. Only a small percentage of the U.S. population is actually using Twitter, but most of the U.S. population knows what it is and knows what people are tweeting because journalists are amplifying those tweets, and that is part of the power of the Internet Research Agency—every major news organization was reproducing tweets, including IRA tweets. So, it is a question then about the responsibility of the journalist and what are the new guidelines for journalists?

TOM ROSENSTIEL: So, one thing about social media as vox pop. When I was at Pew, Andy Kohut and I constructed a couple of experiments where we would find a moment that you could survey and then we would capture the public Facebook feed and the Twitter firehose about those same moments, and then we would analyze that data algorithmically to see whether the social media sentiment matched with what we were able to publicly survey. It never did. It never matched because people tweet about stuff that they are amped up about, and that kind of bland center is missing from social media.

SID MILKIS: This has always been a problem. I'm sure John Adams thought we had a great crisis in our democracy when Tom Paine's pamphlet, *Common Sense*, came out. But, you mentioned three things this morning: faster and wider diffusion, less accountability, and more power for the individual. Have these changes made things so intractable, so incorrigible that there isn't any real therapy? Is there some way to make these contemporary problems more accountable, or are we just in the nightmare of Walter Lippmann's *Public Opinion*, where the weaknesses of democracy are coming home to roost and there's no way out?

JACK HAMILTON: This would be Walter Lippmann's worst moment because even the media doesn't work.

HEIDI TWOREK: It seems to me like we're circling around the same discussion 100 years later, and we're asking a lot of the same questions with a remarkably small amount of empirical evidence that we have gathered in the intervening hundred years. We're still asking, what did people really read in the '60s or '70s in the newspaper? And I think part of what the current moment confronts us with is that most people did not read the stories that we thought were important. A bunch of people were just buying the newspaper so that they could read the comics, see the weather, and check the sports scores, and now they aren't doing that anymore. But, can it change? Oh yeah, absolutely. Look at what happens with the fraudulent medical ads in the past. It takes a long time, but things do change. People had to die in order for there to be serious intervention with medical ads, but, the point is that there is a possibility for change.

LARA BROWN: So, my question to you is, can journalists get to a place where they report the important but not the urgent? That's the problem with Twitter, every little Twitter meme seems urgent, so then everybody is sort of wondering whether they should put it on the evening news.

TOM ROSENSTIEL: So, we measured the first generation of the internet via page view, and the reason we did that was because we thought we were going to subsidize the internet with advertising, with pop-up and banner ads. Now that journalistic organizations are moving to subscription and membership and other things, because they lost advertising to these two giant companies (Facebook and Google), the metrics that news organizations are using are either a blended metric of many different things or they are moving toward measuring high-attention minutes. You measure not only how many people looked at a story, but also for how long, and whether they shared it or liked it on social media. Once you start to measure the internet differently, you get a very different impression of how people actually interact, and it's not cat videos and clickbait. What we were doing in that initial moment, with the old metric, was measuring equally the thing that annoyed people and drove them away, and the thing

they felt was of high value. So, we are getting to the very beginning of using a slightly more intelligent metric.

The other thing I would say about Lippmann—that's powerful about *Public Opinion*—is that he was writing in a moment when it wasn't clear whether democracy was a viable form of government.

JACK HAMILTON: Lippmann is good to end on. First, *Public Opinion* is only one point at which Lippmann talked about this problem. He wrestled with this problem his entire life. At one point he thought the solution was better news coverage. This is in the essay he co-wrote in the *New Republic* on *New York Times'* coverage of the Russian Revolution. If journalists just did a better job, it would be okay. When he got to *Public Opinion*, he said journalism was part of the problem. His solution then was better mediating institutions and better education. Then, in his next book, he threw this all over the cliff and said it's not going to work. That evolution of thought is important because it showed that he reached a point where he had just lost all faith. But, when he became a real journalist, he said journalism *would*, after all, work, which is, of course, a whole chapter out of *Public Opinion*—self-interest. He just thought television wouldn't work.

Heidi and I have argued in a different paper that there has always been news, but for a small period of time there's been journalism where you had gatekeeping and an economic model that worked miraculously, for a while. And 20th century journalists, being ahistorical, thought that was the way it always worked, and all that needed to happen was for owners to give them more money—then everything would be okay. And so, we're back to where it was in the beginning, chaos, with the exception that there's still some good journalism.

The question which we take up next is what are the solutions for navigating the new-old world of news.

CHAPTER 5:
SOLUTIONS TO FAKE NEWS

Media Manipulation and the Challenge of Fake News

Leonard M. Apcar

Fake news welled up as a public issue after the 2016 presidential election, but my colleagues have documented that fakes, frauds, and hoaxes in American journalism are more than a century old, and its latest form emerged years before the presidential campaign. This paper takes a closer look at the fake news of the 2016 election, and the subsequent research and responses to this latest iteration of fake news.

Fake News in the 2016 Election

Even if motives for producing fake news are somewhat predictable, the pass and share culture of social media has given fakeries a new and lucrative life. For example, to make money a group of teens in Macedonia generated a series of fake stories in the final weeks of the American election. In another instance, an American political consultant successfully gamed social media and ginned up a fake story about pre-marked ballots hidden away before the election in a warehouse in Ohio. His fakery made him more than \$20,000 in Google ad revenue in about a day.

Some fakers are less motivated by generating money and instead seek to damage the reputation of a company, a product or a politician. Still others—namely the Russian government—are seemingly intent on creating an atmosphere of doubt in American government, media and other institutions.

By now some of the bigger fake news stories are familiar, including: “The Pope Endorses Trump” and “Clinton Sold Weapons to ISIS.” If you missed them, here are some of the top fakes passed around on Facebook in 2016 and the number of Facebook views¹:

1. Obama Signs Executive Order Banning the Pledge of Allegiance in Schools Nationwide”: 2,177,000
2. “Women Arrested for Defecating on Boss’ Desk After Winning the Lottery”: 1,765,000
3. “Pope Francis Shocks World, Endorses Donald Trump for President, Releases Statement”: 961,000
4. “Trump Offering Free One-Way Tickets to Africa & Mexico for Those Who Wanna Leave America”: 802,000
5. “Cinnamon Roll Can Explodes Inside Man’s Butt During Shoplifting Incident”: 765,000

1 Evann Gastaldo, “These Are the 5 Biggest Fake News Stories of the Year,” *Newsler*, December 30, 2016, <http://www.newser.com/story/236204/these-are-the-5-biggest-fake-news-stories-of-the-year.html>.

President Barack Obama, in a postelection interview with *The New Yorker*, described a media ecosystem where “everything is true and nothing is true,” and “the capacity to disseminate misinformation, wild conspiracy theories, [and] to paint the opposition in wildly negative light without any rebuttal—that has accelerated in ways that much more sharply polarize the electorate and make it very difficult to have a common conversation.”² It is no wonder that Oxford Dictionaries selected “post-truth” as its word of the year in 2016 and defined it as the state of affairs when “objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.”³

Studying Fake News

According to the MIT Media Lab’s report published in *Science*, fake news travels wider and at a faster rate than real news.⁴ In the survey, conservative users in particular said they were more apt to share sensational fake stories with the idea that “this doesn’t sound true, but it wouldn’t surprise me if it was.” About 60 percent of all visits to fake news websites came from the most conservative 10 percent of readers.⁵

What is known is that the vast majority of Americans (93 percent) get their news online and the main source is Facebook.⁶ And 2 out of 3 Pew survey respondents believed that fake news caused “a great deal of confusion about the basic facts of current issues and events.”⁷ While nearly all social media users say they saw a fake story during the 2016

2 David Remnick, “Obama Reckons With A Trump Presidency,” *The New Yorker*, November 28, 2016, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/11/28/obama-reckons-with-a-trump-presidency>.

3 “Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year 2016 is ...,” *Oxford Dictionaries*, November 16, 2016, <https://www.oxforddictionaries.com/press/news/2016/11/17/WOTY-16>.

4 Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, and Sinan Aral, “The Spread Of True And False News Online,” *Science* 359 (2018), <http://science.sciencemag.org/content/359/6380/1146>.

5 Andrew Guess, Brendan Nyhan, Jason Reifler, “Selective Exposure to Misinformation: Evidence from the consumption of fake news during the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign,” *European Research Council*, January 9, 2018, <https://www.dartmouth.edu/~nyhan/fake-news-2016.pdf>.

6 “Digital News Fact Sheet,” *Pew Research Center*, June 6, 2018, <http://www.journalism.org/fact-sheet/digital-news/>.

7 Michael Barthel, Amy Mitchell and Jesse Holcomb, “Many Americans Believe Fake News Is Sowing Confusion,” *Pew Research Center*, December 15, 2016, <http://www.journalism.org/2016/12/15/many-americans-believe-fake-news-is-sowing-confusion/>.

election campaign relatively few people—roughly eight per cent— reported actually believed a fake story. Researchers discovered that fake news websites reached about 27 percent of their sample, but fake stories as a percentage of total stories was relatively small—an estimated 2.6 percent of all stories.⁸

This populist age in politics is fueled by another dimension. “People say what’s popular whether its factual or not,” says Aaron Sharockman from PolitiFact. “Clearly there is a thought that people see Trump’s success and they know he tells falsehoods, and that becomes part of their playbook.”⁹

Solutions to Fake News

Now, almost two years after the election, everything has changed and nothing has changed. The national intelligence community concluded that Russia used social media to influence the American election in 2016. Facebook confirmed that Russians purchased political ads during the campaign and lawmakers have threatened to regulate Facebook and other platforms unless they find ways to cut down on fake news and Russian interference. Fact-checking sites have grown in scope and number, and there is even a site—RealClearPolitics—that reviews how the fact-checkers do their work.¹⁰

But it is far from clear that any of these revelations will significantly undercut fake news. A denial by a fact checker doesn’t always convince people that the story is indeed false. In fact, sociologists say denials can strengthen people’s beliefs in the falsehood, an instinct that has fueled conspiracy theorists for a long time.¹¹

While research has all shed light on the fake news problem, less has been done to try to control it. Harvard’s Shorenstein Center on Media Politics and Public Policy suggested several “possible pathways” to reducing fake news, ranging from signaling to users that a news article may

8 Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral, “Spread Of True And False News Online,” <http://science.sciencemag.org/content/359/6380/1146>.

9 Personal interview with Aaron Sharockman June 28, 2018.

10 “Fact Check Review,” *RealClearPolitics*, https://www.realclearpolitics.com/fact_check_review/.

11 Cass R. Sunstein, *On Rumors: How Falsehoods Spread, Why We Believe Them, What Can Be Done* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009).

be fake or misleading to “collaborating more closely with journalists to make truth ‘louder.’”

Media literacy educators offer catchy-sounding tools such as IM-VAIN (Independent, Multiple, Verify, Authoritative, Informed, Named) or the CRAAP (Currency, Relevance, Authority, Accuracy, Purpose) test to guide students toward independent, authoritative, corroborated, reporting and information. These tools include checking the URL, searching a quote or image to see if it appears on other news sites and using independent fact-check sites. A national survey by Louisiana State University’s Public Policy Research Laboratory at the Manship School’s Reilly Center for Media & Public Affairs suggests that about half of users run such checks and in other studies it appears that number is far less than half. The study also found that people overstate their own ability to recognize fake news.¹²

Along those lines, fact-checking sites, try as they might to clarify or flatly knockdown a misleading claim or outright falsehood, say they worry they are not reaching the people who need their services. “How do we build trust?” asks Sharockman, executive director of *PolitiFact*, the largest fact-checking site, which won a Pulitzer Prize a few years ago. “Our biggest challenge is reaching people who need it the most.”¹³

12 Tryfon Boukouvdis, Pamela Labbe and Michael Henderson, “Do Americans Overstate Their Ability to Recognize Fake News: Evidence from a Nationally Representative Survey,” Manship School of Mass Communication, Louisiana State University.

13 Personal interview with Aaron Sharockman, June 28, 2018.

☰ Considerations for Responding to Fake News

Paul Mihailidis

At the Breaux Symposium on Fake News, participants outlined the historical and political conditions that have contributed to the present phenomenon of fake news. Providing a historical context for the ways in which information and news have distorted truth and intentionally manipulated information allows us to consider the larger contextual and social factors that play into the complex relationship between information and democracy. However, the current climate for false information, and the responses that have been recommended, deserve particular attention. Today's landscape for fake news is born from specific technological realities that have challenged long held assumptions about journalism, news, and audiences, and the ways in which these interact with the norms of democratic systems.

In a recently released study about fake news and twitter, MIT researchers found that fake news has significantly more reach than other forms of information, and spreads further within and across digital platforms.¹ The authors of the study, in an interview in *The Atlantic*, note that “false information outperforms true information ... and that is not just because of bots. It might have something to do with human nature.”² In their data, the researchers found that bots share roughly the same amount of true and false information, but humans are more apt to share false information than true information.

Such findings reinforce a reality for media and information flow in digital culture where like-minded individuals congregate in shared online spaces to exchange information with one another throughout the day. In these spaces, people rely primarily on peers and social networks for information and news, therefore making media and news institutions less present and familiar. The result is a crisis of trust in media and public institutions in general.³

At the same time, giant technology companies like Google and Facebook design algorithms that promote sensational, polarizing, and vitriolic content. We normalize spectacle. A recent article by media scholar Zeynep Tufekci found that YouTube recommendations, for example,

1 Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, and Sinan Aral, “The Spread Of True And False News Online,” *Science* 359 (2018), <http://science.sciencemag.org/content/359/6380/1146>.

2 Robinson Meyer, “The Grim Conclusions of the Largest-Ever Study of Fake News,” *The Atlantic*, March 8, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/03/largest-study-ever-fake-news-mit-twitter/555104/>.

3 2017 Edelman Trust Barometer, January 21, 2017, <https://www.edelman.com/trust2017/>.

become more radical and extreme as users watch political content on the platform.⁴ In his recent piece for *The Atlantic*, “Google and Facebook Have Failed Us,” Alexis Madrigal details how the algorithms of the platform promote hoaxes, false information, rumors, witch hunts, and damaging information in its general and news search functions.⁵ While these companies have recently expressed mea culpas and worked to rectify some of the damage they have done, the reality stays the same: their algorithms promote spectacular and sensational content because it is more shareable, which allows them to extract more data from users. The result is more control over advertising and revenue streams. This priority is detailed in a recent *New York Times Magazine* feature on the policy and lobbying efforts of large tech companies to maintain little to no regulation on how they attain and use data from their platforms.⁶

So, while fake news is not a new phenomenon, it has been weaponized in the current political and technological climates. Evgeny Morozov has written about the phenomenon as one in which digital capitalism has taken advantage of democratic crises to promote specific partisan and populist agendas. Morozov calls this immaturity of democracy, which “manifests itself in two types of denial: the denial of the economic origins of most of today’s problems; and the denial of the profound corruption of professional expertise.”⁷

In this landscape, solutions to fake news often take two general directions: *regulation and education*. Calls for regulation routinely focus on finding ways to hold companies more accountable for their algorithms, the ways in which they extract data, and the mechanisms that prioritize online advertising and click generation. The European Union’s recent General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) is a step in this direction, but regulating large, borderless technology companies is complex, and

4 Zeynep Tufekci, “YouTube, the Great Radicalizer,” *The New York Times*, March 10, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/10/opinion/sunday/youtube-politics-radical.html>.

5 Alexis C. Madrigal, “Google and Facebook Failed Us,” *The Atlantic*, October 2, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2017/10/google-and-facebook-have-failed-us/541794/>

6 Nicholas Confessore, “The Unlikely Activists Who Took On Silicon Valley—and Won,” August 14, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/14/magazine/facebook-google-privacy-data.html>.

7 Evgeny Morozov, “Moral Panic Over Fake News Hides The Real Enemy—The Digital Giants,” *The Guardian*, January 7, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jan/08/blaming-fake-news-not-the-answer-democracy-crisis>.

notoriously lags behind their innovation and emerging initiatives. Regulations of media have continued to loosen over decades in the United States, and in the wake of congressional hearings with large tech companies, it seems that the lobbying power of these companies, and their ability to circumvent blanket regulations, will continue to outpace the regulation itself.

The second direction is education, or what is increasingly referred to as media and news literacies. This often entails developing a set of skills and dispositions that allow people to more critically analyze and evaluate media, to reflect on their media use, and to create and participate in media practice as a form of empowerment. These literacies are important, and they are needed. Recent research from Stanford University shows how few middle schoolers could differentiate true from false information online.⁸ Teaching people to critique and create media is essential, and needs to be more fully integrated in formal and informal education systems. These forms of literacy and education, however, will not alone suffice to respond to the current crisis of legitimacy and spectacle that has engulfed our society.

Responses to the current epidemic of fake news seem to be centered not on the media systems, but on the fracturing of the human connections that are central to functioning democracies. Like the MIT study, research over the last decade or so shows that people, even those with considerable media savvy, are more interested in sharing information that aligns with values and ideologies than in slowing down to check if sources are accurate.⁹ This is a human condition, not a media condition. When networks allow and intentionally prioritize content that is most shareable, most implicitly engaging, and elicits the most intense responses, the result is a wave of media savvy citizens perpetuating the crisis of trust and spreading fake news. And when politicians, and mainstream media legitimate such behavior, it further embeds a confidence of distrust in our society.

8 Brooke Donald, "Stanford Researchers Find Students Have Trouble Judging the Credibility of Information Online," *Stanford Graduate School of Education*, November 22, 2016, <https://ed.stanford.edu/news/stanford-researchers-find-students-have-trouble-judging-credibility-information-online>.

9 Denise-Marie Ordway, "What Research Says About How Bad Information Spreads Online," *Journalist's Resource*, July 19, 2018, <https://journalistsresource.org/studies/society/news-media/fake-news-bad-information-online-research>.

Meaningful responses to the current state of fake news must start with regulation and more media and news literacy. But these initiatives alone will not provide meaningful responses. Combating fake news must begin with a re-articulation of the values that anchor human connection, and what Sloman and Fernbach describe as “learning with others.”¹⁰ Responses to fake news have to prioritize what it means to engage in meaningful dialog, to disagree in generative ways, and to see media and news in the context of the communities we inhabit and strive to inhabit.

I don’t think that the current problem of fake news is born from a citizenry that can no longer decipher truth from falsehood, or that is continuously “duped” by media and politicians. Rather, I think the problem is a society fractured by inequalities—structural, geographical, economic, and cultural—that, combined with social networks that also promote such divides, have led to a situation where the foundations of democratic dialog and community values have eroded at the national and local levels. False information will always be present in our civic systems. It’s always been there. Responses should be human-driven, technologies should prioritize gathering and imagination, and news literacies must prioritize civic intentionality. In this way our solutions can be about bringing people together towards a common good, in support of diversity, trust, and engagement across differences.

¹⁰ Steven Sloman and Philip Fernbach, *The Knowledge Illusion* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2017).

☰ Trump, Twitter, and ‘Fake News’ as a Rhetorical Device

Michael Cornfield

There is fake news, and then there is “Fake News.” The difference is crucial to understanding and treating problems for American politics bound up in the latter.

Fake news, as many of the contributions in this volume document, is a social phenomenon. It has multiple long roots in individual mischief, social psychology, political conflict, media economics, communications technology, diplomatic maneuvering, and information warfare. For decades, fake news has been dropped from the skies and adorned supermarket checkout lines. It has been crafted to cater to guilty pleasures and common dreams. It bubbles up from rumors. People tend to think fake news fools a lot of people other than themselves. They—we—have been right and wrong about that.

The capitalized “Fake News,” by contrast, is an accusative term instigated by Donald Trump. According to the TrumpTwitterArchive, in the first year and a half of his presidency, Donald Trump tweeted the term “Fake News” or “Fake News Media” 242 times.¹ That’s nearly six percent of his 4,181 tweets while president (more than seven a day).²

Behold the dissemination power of Trump repeating the words “Fake News”: during the same time period he tweeted them 242 times they showed up in 23,469,922 Twitter posts originating in the United States.³ For comparison’s sake: “#metoo” surfaced in 4,612,100 posts from October 15, 2017, the day that phrase took off, until the end of July 2018; in that same span there were more than twice as many “Fake News” tweets—11,126,556.

This heavy buzz around Trump’s “Fake News” can be seen by looking at Twitter traffic in three short periods when non-case-sensitive posts containing the phrase soared to its highest levels.

1 From 1/19/17 through 7/31/18, to be precise. “Trump Twitter Archive,” accessed October 15, 2018, <http://www.trumptwitterarchive.com/>.

2 By comparison, “Witch Hunt” appeared 100 times in tweets President Trump issued in this time period, “MAGA” 88 times, “No Collusion” 39 times, and “Deep State” and “Drain the Swamp” five times each.

3 This is based on data collected by the social media monitoring and analytics company Crimson Hexagon.

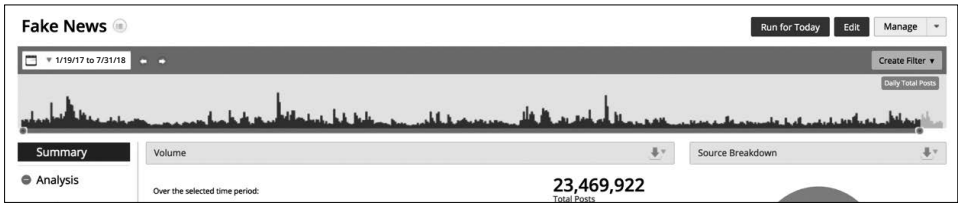


Chart compiled via Crimson Hexagon

Three Instances of “Fake News”

The most retweeted post of the President Trump “Fake News” tweet set originated on February 17, 2017, the day after a Trump press conference was judged by *The Washington Post* to contain 15 departures from the facts.⁴ This televised showdown sparked the largest “Fake News” onrush in U.S.-based Twitter to date, with nearly half a million posts in a three-day span. (This is represented by the “towers” on the left-hand side of the bar chart.) The first day’s spike was in response to Trump’s firing of National Security Advisor Michael Flynn. The second day’s spike was related to leaks connecting the Trump campaign to Russian agents beyond Flynn. The third day’s spike was about a *New York Times* editorial that called for a special prosecutor to investigate.⁵ A scandal “-gate” was swinging open.

The president defended himself by calling the messengers “Fake News” and invoking another phrase with authoritarian and even totalitarian provenance:

“The FAKE NEWS media (failing @nytimes, @NBCNews, @ABC, @CBS, @CNN) is not my enemy, it is the enemy of the American people!”

On Twitter, Joe Passantino of *BuzzFeed News* shared a video in which Shepard Smith of *Fox News* turned to the camera (knowing the president watches *Fox*) to express solidarity with *CNN*’s Jim Acosta; the president, Smith declared, should have answered Acosta’s question about the

4 Glenn Kessler and Michelle Ye Hee Lee, “Fact-Checking President Trump’s News Conference,” February 16, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2017/02/16/fact-checking-president-trumps-news-conference/?utm_term=.e18693b111cob.

5 The Editorial Board, “Bring On The Special Prosecutor,” *The New York Times*, February 17, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/17/opinion/bring-on-the-special-prosecutor.html>.

Russia ties.⁶ This dramatized the point that Russian interference in the election transcended party ideology. On the other side, activist Michael Nöthem exhorted his readers to tweet if they agreed that Smith should depart *Fox News* and that the “Fake News Media” is the enemy of the American people.

A second “Fake News” spike—and the middle tower on the frequency timeline—occurred on June 27, 2017 (the highest in a single day, at 208,645 mentions), and the following day. It was triggered by the resignations of three *CNN* investigative reporters who published a story that ran briefly on the *CNN* website. Trump entourage member Anthony Scaramucci had denied the account of his involvement in the Russia scandal. *CNN* apologized to him and he accepted it.

The first day, Trump tweeted: “So they caught Fake News CNN cold, but what about NBC, CBS & ABC? What about the failing @nytimes & @washingtonpost?” In this case, “they” referred to *CNN* itself, which investigated their own reporters after Scaramucci complained. Journalist Brian J. Karem subtweeted: “So, when we are wrong we correct ourselves but when has POTUS ever done that? We are not FAKE news.”

Had this second spike been about real fake news—yes, we must use that oxymoron—there would have been real-world consequences. Instead, professional standards and civil behavior prevailed even as Trump extracted thematic mileage from the incident.

The third and rightward-most skyscraper on the “Fake News” Twitter frequency timeline occurred in January 2018 with Trump’s teaser and delivery of “Fake News Awards.” No ceremony took place; the awards were announced on a blog post at *gop.com*, nine days after the promised date and only one hour after the website was fixed from a crash. No trophy was awarded, as promised two months earlier. Most importantly, the awards went to media organizations for lapses and errors that were swiftly corrected, and in some cases (such as the aforementioned *CNN* flub) cost reporters their jobs. The last “award” referenced no media organization, consisting instead of a blanket denial of “Russia Collusion!”

These were, in essence, fake awards. Yet many media outlets covered it. “Easy to mock but difficult to ignore,” as the report in *The New York*

⁶ The clip had 4.6 million views as of August 15, 2018.

Times put it.⁷ And many people tweeted about it under the “Fake News” rubric.

The Problem and Possible Solutions

The heavy traffic for “Fake News” tweets is the compound product of Trump’s unusual talent for publicity, multiplied by the perennially public interest in the presidency, and multiplied again by journalists’ penchant to talk about themselves. There is no shinier object that wins media attention than a mirror.⁸ The main conclusion to be drawn from this data is that Americans have tweeted a lot about “Fake News” as prompted and framed by President Trump.

Anti-media rhetoric is not, in itself, the problem. Media bashing is as old as the republic and a staple of conservative rhetoric for decades. Yet for an adjectival rally cry, “Fake News” goes farther than criticisms directed at the “mainstream” media (from those oaring against the current), “liberal” media (conservatives), and “establishment” media (populists). The Trump neologism asserts that “the people” are synonymous with the loyal followers of Trump, and the journalists who are critical of Trump are the “enemy of the American people.” To quote @realdonaldtrump, these journalists are “purposely wrong,” “out of control,” “truly bad people,” “crazed,” “very dangerous and sick,” “corrupt,” “hypocrites,” and most frequently “VERY dishonest.”

The examples of three “Fake News” twitter spikes illustrate eight tactics at work in Trump’s “Fake News” offensive.⁹

1. Demonization: the media publish “Fake News” deliberately
2. Division: it’s Trump and the American people versus “them”—the journalists
3. Blurring: assertions without documentation and syntactical vagueness
4. Distortion: false, exaggerated and misleading claims

7 Matt Fegenheimer and Michael M. Grynbaum, “Trump Hands Out ‘Fake News Awards,’ Sans The Red Carpet,” *The New York Times*, January 17, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/17/business/media/fake-news-awards.html>.

8 It is possible that some of the talk was itself fake, but my scan of the talkers’ identities and their posts’ contents shows few of the telltale signs of bots.

9 The eight categories are described in shorthand terms and paraphrased here, and discussed at length in the companion paper to this essay.

5. Distraction: “Don’t look at that, look at this”
6. Self-Glorification: my efforts for you are heroic
7. Uncivil Aggression: no concessions, apologies, or errors
8. Issue Spinning: “Our causes are good and we are winning”¹⁰

Trump’s tweets and the retweets they triggered have shed much more heat than light on political actors. By focusing on the relationship between the president and the media, “Fake News” tweets pull civic attention away not just from the scandal, but also from the issues facing the nation and government actions.

It is understandable—only human—that some have reacted to Trump’s tweets by speculating about his personality, sanity, intelligence, and self-control. He primes these speculations with his name-calling and personal reactions to criticism. Responding in kind may be satisfying, but it takes the conversation where he wants it to go.

The press has reacted by fact-checking Trump’s claims, by openly discussing how to frame Trump’s claims of “Fake News,” and with a raft of coordinated editorials on August 16, 2018, in support of an independent press. This is all well and good, albeit sometimes it is done with excessive self-attention per the shiny mirror. A recognized irony is that Trump has been great for the ratings and readership in the news business and for increasing public consciousness on the crucial nature of news in relation to the exercise of power.

For readers of tweets and tweet-embedded texts, the most appropriate and powerful solution is voting against those who affiliate with Trump’s campaign against “Fake News,” and voting for candidates whose campaigns reflect and refine their views about non-Trumpian issues (e.g. health care and opioid addiction, debt-to-GDP ratio challenges, the erosion of the middle class, climate change). There is a chicanery involved in elections, but most election results for now remain the hardest and biggest facts of politics. The use of “Fake News” as a political attack, will continue to rise, start to fall, or level off in accordance with who wins and who loses at the ballot box.

¹⁰ In presenting this catalog of rhetorical effects I do not mean to condemn all means and ends associated with them. Used alone, techniques 5 through 8 fall into the region of acceptable and realistic political communication. War and diplomacy present circumstances which may justify the dissemination of fake news, number 4. But in 1 through 3, and 4 in issue areas such as immigration policy and scandal defense, I think the cry “Fake News” has done far more harm than good.

“Fake News” charges can be defused by widening the focus from what’s wrong with the news (or what’s wrong with Trump) to include consideration of policy: to pivot from personal attacks to important issues. Focusing on the fights between Trump and the media sucks us into a media vortex. By pivoting away from the tribal contexts that social media so often foster (and that the Fake News dialogue has so often degenerated into), a tweeter thereby encourages a discussion of politics in terms of policy agendas and alternatives. One example of such a Twitter pivot was by a former Obama speechwriter, who tweeted, with sardonic irony: “Trump and the RNC focused on rolling out Fake News Awards instead of negotiating to avoid a shutdown. Very cool, very presidential.” The comment was unkind and personal, but it also made a little room for an item on the national agenda. More tweeters should use the comment threads of elected officials to bring up issues that matter to them. And journalists should embed such context-expanding comments in their stories, along with the snarky tweets that sparked the debate. This will give readers a sense of a substantive conversation that can coexist on Twitter along with invective when authorities speak and are spoken back to by citizens.

Before Trump we referred to fake news in less exciting, but more precise, descriptors: rumor, propaganda, bullshit, misdirection, bias, hype, invective, and error. Trump’s achievement with Twitter and his use of the bully pulpit has been to agglomerate these clarifying names for specific communications faults and flaws into a single epithet, which becomes the constant drumbeat of “Fake News” that reverberates across the public sphere.

Those legacy terms (rumor, propaganda, bias, sensationalism, etc.) are a more specific language for media criticism, given the array of situations and actions they can name. Should those terms supplant “Fake News” (fake news, too, alas, must go), it will be an indication that Trump’s spell over public attention has been broken.

Discussion on Solutions to Fake News

LEN APCAR: As we're talking about weighing the solutions, we benefited from the Reilly Center's polling operation at LSU, who with some graduate students put together the report, "Do Americans Overstate Their Ability to Recognize Fake News?" That's not a rhetorical question, the data is actually here. This is a national representative sample of a thousand U.S. adults, and what we wanted to know was: Do respondents know fake news when they see it? And if they suspect fake news, do they run some checks of their own? If you add up the 39 percent who say they're very confident in their ability to look at fake news and 45 percent who are somewhat confident, you come up with 84 percent of people think they know fake news when they see it. Then we asked them, "Well, how often do you check the URL? Do you check the quote? Do you check the photo?" Then it drops off precipitously.

One solution for fake news is the idea of journalistic checks, such as *Snopes*, which is an independent group who were originally in the business of fact-checking urban myths and that kind of thing. They weren't necessarily journalists, but they have kind of moved into the journalism space. They tend to debunk stories like one that has grown up in the last three days about a fake news story that Hillary Clinton was killed in a hunting accident. Another fact checking operation is the Pulitzer prize-winning *PolitiFact*, which came out of the *Tampa Bay Times*, which is famous for, among other things, the "Pants on Fire" ratings. *Fact Checker* is run by Glenn Kessler at *The Washington Post*. That's where the Pinocchios come in. He uses essentially a journalistic treatment to check national news stories that are suspect, and about half of them come from readers asking "Is this true?" They try to be dispassionate and nonpartisan and they do not deal in opinion. They deal more in reported news using a "reasonable person" perspective and try to be as transparent as possible. And they also have what they call a "recidivism watch" where prominent people continue to report bad information. One of them is Nancy Pelosi, who said 24 million people would be without health care if they repealed Obamacare, and *Fact Checker* showed that was a bogus number and gave a different number. They also had Sean Spicer, who uses repeatedly debunked citations for Trump's voter fraud claims.

In the media literacy education space there are various programs. There is the News Literacy Project just outside of Washington started by a former *Los Angeles Times* correspondent who has gotten a fair amount of funding from foundations and philanthropic organizations. They bring reporters and editors into classrooms to talk about various journalistic fact-checking skills. There is a curriculum that's been basically customized and designed by SUNY Stony Brook, which has a News Literacy Project and Digital Resource Center. One of the very early pioneers in this area is a professor previously at Temple and now at the University of Rhode Island, Renee Hobbs, who came at this about 20 to 25 years ago and really has owned the K through 12 space in teaching people about media literacy. What Hobbs did was teach people about the ways in which you could deconstruct an advertisement to see the messaging, including the prejudicial issues and stereotyping around race, age, and other forms of demographic stereotyping, and the sexual objectification that can take place in an advertisement.

MICHAEL CORNFIELD: An article that some of you may have already seen that ran in the journal *Science* is called “The Spread of True and False News Online.” Let me just read the abstract. “We investigated the differential diffusion of all the verified true and false news stories distributed on Twitter from 2006 to 2017—126,000 stories tweeted by 3 million people, more than 4.5 million times. We classified news as true or false using information from six independent fact-checking organizations that exhibited 95 percent to 98 percent agreement on the classifications.” So, *Snopes*, the *Fact Checker*, *PolitiFact*, and three others. “We found falsehood spread significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth in all categories of information, and the effects were more pronounced for false political news than for false news about terrorism, natural disasters, science, urban legends, or financial information.” Now we go to the psychology on it. “We found that false news was more novel than true news, which suggests that people were more likely to share novel information.” What they did in this study, is when they identified a false piece of information, they tracked the diffusion tweet-by-tweet, person-by-person across the entire Twitterverse. So, when they say we found that false news was more novel, that's content analysis. They also found that false news

stories inspired fear, disgust, and surprise, whereas true stories inspired anticipation, sadness, joy, and trust, which suggests to me that the problem is how we feel about our country—how we feel about ourselves. The problem of fake news is a psychological problem at the bottom, and it pertains to politics in the sense that it pertains to trust and efficacy. Last point, contrary to conventional wisdom, bots accelerated the spread of true and false news at the same rate. False news spreads more than the truth because humans, not bots, are more likely to spread it.

PAUL MIHAILIDIS: I don't think the question is people's ability to fact-check or recognize false stories or fabrication. Instead, I don't think there's an infrastructure or the conditions that motivate people to fact-check. There are decades worth of psychological studies about online news consumption out of Penn State that show continuously people will willfully and knowingly go beyond fact-checking to simply support and share stories that affirm their values, and I'll be the first to admit this happens to me too. So, implicitly, people track with values before they track accuracy.

We've done a lot of research around this, which I want to talk about in a second, but just picking up on that question about why I'm optimistic about solutions. There's a lot of research that shows that media literacy interventions in spaces of formal education can increase knowledge about issues. If you teach people how to critique a story, then you put stories in front of them, the basic act of critique can happen, so media literacy can make a difference.

Now, it is true that in a non-structured setting—outside of the classroom—media literacy is not as effective. A recent study out of Stanford showed that if you take a group of middle schoolers and just give them fact-checking opportunities, they don't do it. They can do it—they have the skills—but they don't.

Another problem is that media and news literacy are often deficit-focused. If the frame is always about what the media does wrong and what's fake, then that frame of mind, we know cognitively, can forefront in people's implicit attention. The last part is that we often see things as transactional and the way we approach solutions to these problems is that we just need better civic education. I think what we found in our research is that these approaches to media literacy are really valuable in giving people knowledge and perhaps awareness, but there is no proof

that they actually change or reform the way that media systems work. In fact, there is only evidence that they increase levels of cynicism. When you teach people how to point out the bad things that media does, people immediately dismiss things as false and become less willing to engage in alternative theories. So, this is why there's a problem with fact-checking. This is why there's a problem with always just pointing out when things are wrong. If that's the frame, then people often times will look for what's wrong and stop when they find out what's wrong.

If we want media and news literacy programs to help people respond to the crisis of fake news, we need to teach people not only how to point it out, but teach people how to find avenues to act or to have civic efficacy and to contribute to some sort of reform. Social networks are really good at helping people articulate concern, and they're so good at doing that, that they actually dissuade people from understanding their capacity to act. They take up almost all of our cognitive time with people sharing their concern about things and voicing concern with younger populations. Because they spend so much time attached to these networks, they don't ever get beyond sharing their concern.

We tested approaching media literacy and news literacy interventions in communities and in classrooms with the concept of a caring ethic. So, instead of asking people what the news is saying or asking for sources or fact-checking, we first talk about caring: "How do you care for ...? What do you care about? How do we express care?" If you go back to how information and media supports what we care about, it becomes a much more vibrant dialogue about credibility, voracity, accuracy, and it doesn't just become about the media as a removed thing that I am critiquing.

We have used the term fake news to kind of cover everything, and we often legitimate and abstract it when we say, "Well, that's fake news," and we need to stop that. This perpetuates a little bit the problem that we have with fake news. What we have found is that approaching this by aligning people's values with information is important. Also providing positive examples, and very local examples, can reframe people's engagement and help people start their own initiatives.

LARA BROWN: Major Garrett, my husband, says to people, "If, from the moment you wake up until the moment you go to sleep, all of the news that you consume makes you feel validated, then you're

doing it wrong.” And he really argues to people that actually you should feel uncomfortable. Reading the news should not make you feel good.

PAUL MIHAILIDIS: Well, my thing is not about the positivity of the value, my thing is about how do we get over the ineffectiveness of media literacy interventions and help people push back against some of the people that are running the systems.

LARA BROWN: My point is, how do you get people to like feeling uncomfortable? My fear about the technology is this belief that you’re a better citizen if you’re always feeling like your world view is right.

PAUL MIHAILIDIS: I want people to engage deeply, whether they are comfortable or uncomfortable. There was a study a couple of years ago by a Boston College psychologist that showed how many times young people switch from platform to platform in an hour. It’s about 30 times an hour, and one of the biggest findings relates to emotional detachment. The minute it becomes somewhat human, they just switch platforms. So, my point is they need to engage deeply in the first place, before they will be willing to consume news that makes them feel uncomfortable.

TOM ROSENSTIEL: The nature of the news matters a lot. If you’re talking about political news, particularly if it’s national, people draw heavily on their pre-existing beliefs. If you’re talking about local news and what’s the best way to get to work today because of traffic, people operate in a pretty different zone. We should be careful to avoid over-generalizing the way that people encounter news.

With regards to solutions, traditional fact-checking is oriented around the claim of a political act—he’s lying or he’s not lying—and there’s lots of research now that shows that’s problematic because nobody likes their guy to be fact-checked, and everybody likes the other guy to be fact-checked. So, there are ways to do it that are more issue-centric fact-checking, that answer the question: “What do you need to know to understand this issue?” Even *PolitiFact* could recalibrate the same fact-checks they’ve already done by reorganizing them around

a topic. Whether or not it works differently would need to be tested, but I think it's a very promising idea. It's much more oriented toward helping you, a citizen, understand something rather than deciding whether that politician is a schmuck or not. It makes it less partisan.

One of the ideas beginning to circulate is what I call organic news literacy. Instead of having a narrative and fact-checking being some curriculum that's in a school, you would actually put on top of the story— who are the sources, what is new in the story, why did we use anonymous sources. People would click or mouse over these things. They'd be learning news literacy skills as they consume news. So, rather than it being something that is a curriculum you learn in grammar school or even a curriculum at all, it's something that you would encounter the more news you consumed.

HEIDI TWOREK: I think there is a distinction between media literacy at large versus story literacy. One type of story literacy that I've been thinking about is a kind of journalism procedural. *Law and Order* and these kind of crime procedurals are incredibly popular. Journalism procedurals, where the journalist is part of the story and is uncovering information, like in *Serial* or *S-Town*, are enormously successful. Playing with the ways that journalism procedurals could incorporate a kind of story literacy and could be a new genre that may be successful both in terms of the number of people who would want to read them and in terms of educating people about the sausage-making that goes into journalism. Even simple things like explaining in the story why you don't use a particular source, because that person isn't credible. There is so much work a journalist does that never gets put in that could help the audience understand what was real and what wasn't.

LARA BROWN: What's interesting about that is it turns on its head some of how journalists see themselves. A good journalist often feels like they're not part of the story, and what you're really talking about is actually making the journalist a human being, and describing how they came to the story and why they wrote the story that they did.

RYAN THORNBURG: And doing something we've never been good at, which is telling people what we don't know. We sort of assume that, if it's not in the story, we don't know, but, we don't explicitly say, "Here's what we tried to find out and we couldn't."

MATTHEW DALLEK: What a lot of you are talking about is to try to be more transparent. Maybe one way of thinking about it is to help the audience feel more confident in the news coverage. Another piece is regulation, whether it's self-imposed from Facebook or if it's from the federal government, so the Facebooks of the world figure out ways to ensure that these feeds don't include reams of fake news stories or Russian-planted news stories.

LARA BROWN: So, let me just ask about the transparency because one of the issues that we identified earlier in the discussion on partisanship and fake news, is that more transparency has actually been a problem for politics. When the public sees more of the sausage-making, it has led to greater mistrust of the system. So my question is, if we create more transparency in how news is collected, constructed, and reported, would that create more trust or would it create more cynicism?

LEN APCAR: I think mainstream media has become vastly more transparent with the internet. The idea that Abe Rosenthal, former editor of *The New York Times*, would ever answer questions from readers or even from the staff on why he was eliminating a copy desk, is just completely absurd. He wouldn't answer any questions, and, in fact, some of his colleagues who are still around say the problem with this younger generation running the *Times* is they talk too damn much. Today, an editor is talking to their readers. They're talking to their staff. They're talking to their union. They're talking to shareholders. They're talking to researchers. It's expected. They have to do it. If you put the journalism assembly line under glass, like a factory tour, I don't necessarily think it would change very much. I think, if anything there would be more people trying to pick it apart because the *Times* and the *Post* have a target. The public editors have served a little bit of that purpose, they were a third party showing the process and interviewing the players in the process and that gave the reader a little bit of a peek inside the tank. They could explain screwups, all the rest of that. Dean Baquet got rid of the public

editor because he said he was doing a lot of that same work anyway, and there's all these fact-checkers and media critics telling us what to do. But I don't think more transparency is going to make a difference, even at the margin.

TOM ROSENSTIEL: It's probably worth noting that there are three major efforts at rebuilding trust right now that are all built around transparency. There's one at the University of Santa Clara that Google has put a lot of money into called the Trusting Project. There's one at Missouri called the Trusting News Project, there's one at Arizona State University called News Co/Lab and all of them are doing partnerships with various news organizations to basically show more of how the sausage is made. *The Washington Post* is involved with the Trusting News Project. You probably noticed that they say at the bottom of the story what the qualifications of the reporter are, how long they've been on a beat—"we interviewed 27 people for this story"—all of that comes out of this literature, and these are scholarly based initiatives.

LARA BROWN: My other question is related to what Michael Cornfield brought up when he asked us what news sources we all trust. It's basically *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Wall Street Journal*.

LEN APCAR: That would not be the answer in Louisiana.

LARA BROWN: Right, so let's go back to the populism conversation—if populists look at those mainstream media news sources as being inherently biased or promoting some elite agenda, then how are they even going to be willing to consider fact checking anything against those publications? And yet all of us feel that those are still the most trustworthy publications that exist. What can we tell the people other than, "Go read those sources that you already think are horribly biased against you?"

MICHAEL CORNFIELD: This plays into a dilemma that's common in crisis communications. What if the fake news is about you, and you know it's fake, and you want to get rid of it. There are two schools of thought. One is flood it with true facts and do not repeat what was fake because to repeat what was fake only spreads what is fake. And the other strategy is to take on the fake news head

on and refute. Do you go after fake news directly or do you do it laterally and try to publicize, for want of a better word, real news or true news?

RYAN THORNBURG: It's not about just crowding it out, but about providing an alternative story, right? It's not just flooding it, you have to provide a credible alternative narrative.

JACK HAMILTON: Obviously we all want to keep trying to educate people to be better at this in colleges and so forth, I mean, that's worthwhile because all the universities should teach critical thinking anyway and detecting fake news is a critical thinking exercise. But, I'm wondering if you can see it as a plus that so many people are talking about fake news? There is a lot more discussion about fake news. The downside is the use of the word "fake news" to discredit anything you don't like. It undermines institutions in a way that's a serious problem. But, is it a plus on the other side that people are talking about it so much? Maybe that is the seed of a solution—actually a step forward.

LEN APCAR: Trump has actually helped the fake news cause in his perverse way because people are much more aware of it. They know that he gets pissed off at something about Stormy and says "FAKE NEWS," but they also know that there is actually fake news out there.

JACK HAMILTON: As Heidi says, "it's a lot easier to check facts today."

HEIDI TWOREK: Yeah, it's easier to check if something is right, but it's harder to know if it's true.

MICHAEL CORNFIELD: Let me close, at least my part of this, with a story that I'm sure none of you know because Matt Dallek wrote a definitive book on a neighboring subject and he hadn't heard of it, which were the rumor clinics. In October of 1942, FDR created by executive order the Office of Facts and Figures. It was headed by Archibald MacLeish, who he had previously appointed to be Librarian of Congress and was a rare individual. He was an accomplished bureaucrat who was also a Pulitzer prize-winning poet. And the purpose of this office was to make sure the Americans knew what was being done in National Defense. It was sort of pre-

war propaganda. After Pearl Harbor, rumors ran rampant in the United States. “We’re going to be invaded.” “What is the future of war bonds?” “Will we be able to ramp up military production?” There were all sorts of anxieties that gave rise to rumors. So, in the Office of Facts and Figures, the Rumor Projection Implementation Plan was created in January of 1942 to set up rumor clinics. A rumor clinic is a specialized group of volunteer professors and advanced students, prepared by a short intensive course on psychological warfare under the supervision of the Civilian Morale Service to collect, analyze, and route to the Office of Facts and Figures, significant rumors current in the clinic’s area. The analysis would include determination of why the rumor was spreading, not just whether it was true or false. MacLeish worried about having groups of people in localities across the country operating without proper control from the White House, so he eventually scotched the idea. But before he scotched the idea he circulated the idea and one of the people who got wind of it was a very eminent psychologist at Harvard named Gordon Allport. Allport loved this idea so much that independent of the government, he created a rumor clinic in Boston. Three hundred people, Bostonians, were deputized as rumor wardens; their job was to collect rumors and report it to the rumor clinic. They tended to be barbers and hair salon operators, and bus drivers and bartenders—people who were placed to hear rumors. Every week, there would be a collection of rumors; Allport and one of his graduate students would analyze them, and they had a prearrangement with the *Boston Herald* that every Sunday throughout 1942 there would be a rumor clinic column in the *Boston Herald*. One of my favorite rumors was that the Japanese are putting ground glass in crab meat. The *Boston Herald* would then rule, not just on whether it was true or false like the fact-checkers, but on why it was being circulated. By the end of 1942, there were clinics in 40 places across the United States—San Francisco, Philadelphia, New York City, Long Island, Syracuse, New Jersey, etc. It became a patriotic thing to volunteer to be a rumor warden.

Then, it died. It died because FDR killed it. FDR decided that he wanted centralized control of information, and at this point, the Office of Facts and Figures had been incorporated into the Office of War Information, and the Office of War Information leaked a story to *The New York Times* about how these rumor

clinics were doing more harm than good because, and this gets back to the dilemma, in the course of trying to eliminate the rumor, they were spreading the rumor. So, they were doing more harm than good. And slowly, the rumor clinics began to die out, maybe also because the war itself became more of a preoccupation than the rumors. But, at the end of all of this in 1947, Professor Allport wrote a report, and here was his conclusion, and this is what got me to that dilemma: “The OWI’s philosophy held that to smother a rumor with facts is better than to single it out for disproof, lest in the process it become unduly advertised.” The rumor clinic philosophy leaned in the opposite direction: “People won’t see the relevance of facts unless it is pointed out to them. Name the rumor and pound it hard was the philosophy.” There my story ends. So, we have been this way before. To me, the big lesson is you can’t get the government involved.

LARA BROWN: You also said two things that I think are really profound. You talked about the idea that rumors really got started because of the anxiety. I think we have to go back to what we know about our world today, which is that there is profound anxiety. Maybe that’s also part of why the proliferation of fake news is so easy, because people are at base emotionally psychologically anxious.

And then there’s also the point, which gets us right back to where we started to a certain degree, which is that we were on a war footing. So, how much of an impact is it that we’re sort of always on yellow alert for possible terrorist acts?

PAUL MIHAILIDIS: There’s a study done by a couple of Yale professors that came out a couple months ago that talked about how small the percentage of fake news actually reaches people. I think the things we’re fighting about are that you have this constant anxiety economically, which is coming down into younger people’s spaces. You have a disruption of information infrastructures. So economically and psychologically there is anxiety. I think we should refocus away from the narrative where fake news is killing us and reinforce the ways that these technologies have given opportunity for people to do interesting reporting and news.

ANDREW SELEE: I wonder about this too. Talking about young people, the whole question on guns, for example, and the recent March for our Lives and what happened in Parkland has made me think that

there are ways that young people engage with the news that is not consuming news but acting on it in a way that they couldn't have done in another era. You know, some really bad things are going to happen because people can interact with each other in new ways. I mean, a lot of the bad stuff happens because people can interact in a horizontal way and share information without any boundaries and without any mediation. But it also allows a lot of proactive things to happen.

MATTHEW DALLEK: And they use those platforms to generate their own stories. They create their own news. That's what the Parkland students were able to do, and in a sense, they became major forces in the national, local and international news media, in part because they were able to kind of manipulate those tools, not in a bad way per se.

ANDREW SELLE: It will be used for good things and bad things, but if you were a 15-year-old at another point in time, you'd be watching the evening news and maybe organize something locally with your friends at your local school.

MICHAEL CORNFIELD: There was a fake photo of Emma Gonzalez ripping up the Constitution, and then the Parkland students used social media to try to refute it. I don't know how well that worked, but that would be an interesting test of fake news and an exhibit for your article.

SID MILKIS: The thing I loved about those kids in Parkland is they marched to Tallahassee. They didn't just go to Washington. It had an effect on state government. Local self-government is less susceptible to the dangerous plebiscitary politics we have fretted over today. And, to your point, Jack, I've always believed that the great danger in a commercial republic is not polarization, but apathy. So, I think the fact that people have been engaged by the problems of journalism and the differences that we battle over in the country, I think that in part, that's a good thing.

JACK HAMILTON: I think Sid's is a good last point, which is you can always hold something up and look at it in a little different way—and that's what we tried to do with this discussion.

**CONCLUSION:
THE LINGUISTIC HAZE
OF 'FAKE NEWS' AND
POSSIBLE PATHS FORWARD**

Tim Klein (editor)

The goal of this report is to examine the broader contexts that have allowed misinformation to flourish; one of the challenges in this task is the linguistic haziness that surrounds the popular term “fake news”—it means different things in different contexts. For instance, at times we’ve discussed “fake news” as Russian propaganda created by the Internet Research Agency to exacerbate division among the American public.¹ At other points, “fake news” has referred to conspiracy theories pushed by cranks like Alex Jones, who use sensational lies and fear to sell overpriced supplements like “Survival shield” and “Caveman shake powder.”² President Trump has used the term “FAKE NEWS” to undercut reporting that he thinks is unfair, biased or anonymously sourced. The term can also refer to old fashion reporting errors that are later corrected by newsrooms. When a single term—“fake news”—is used to represent newsroom bias—both intentional and unintentional—along with reporting errors, foreign propaganda, sensationalism to make money, fiction packaged in a fake news wrapper,³ partisan spin, and the use of anonymous or dubious sources, then the lack of precision in our terminology gets in the way of a deeper understanding.

If we are going to come to any general consensus on the very serious problems we’re facing, our words need to have precise meanings. As Michael Cornfield pointed out in his essay, when we can go back to discussing the shortcomings of journalism and political communication by using the more precise terms—such as “implicit bias,” “explicit bias,” “foreign propaganda,” “sensationalism,” “spin,” and “reporting errors”—then we are more likely to accurately identify the problems and come up with solutions.⁴

There are more subtle forms of fake news that also need to be identified if they are to be countered. When a hostile foreign state obtains authentic hacked documents and releases them as if they were coming from an activist hacker—a “hacktivist”—it gives the propagandist the legitimacy of a principled activist. From what we know, this is how Rus-

1 Discussed in pages 7-9, 33-36, 41-42, 48 of this report.

2 For example, Tom Rosenstiel cited Alex Jones as a modern-day patent medicine peddler, 15. In the discussion Matthew Dallek pointed out the overlapping interests of Alex Jones’s programming and Russia’s propaganda—both of which attempted to discredit the evidence-based news of the mainstream media.

3 Paraphrased from Ryan Thornburg on 47. One example of fiction wrapped in a new wrapper is in 1938 when Orson Welles interrupted a fictionalized but realistic sounding radio-news broadcast with a report about an alien invasion—it was not meant to pass as real news, but some people were fooled nonetheless.

4 Cornfield, “Trump, Twitter, and ‘Fake News’ as a Rhetorical Device,” 62.

sia released DNC emails—they relied on the hacktivist pseudonym of Guccifer 2.0 to deliver the documents to Wikileaks, who released them to the world. This form of “fake news” relies on seemingly accurate documentation that is released from a fake or misleading source.

There is also fake source material or fake documentation—such as the false letter spreading the lie that the Rothschilds gave \$150 million to the Clinton campaign, or Putin’s false statement that Bill Browder and associates had given \$400 million to Clinton.⁵ This fake source material enters the information ecosystem, where “sloppy” journalists become “useful idiots” in spreading misinformation and foreign propaganda.⁶

If fake news is a pathology, then its linguistic vagueness and mailability is one of its first lines of attack. This is especially true in a democracy, where freedom of speech—including the freedom to spread fake news—is considered sacred. Without meaningful language, democracy cannot exist. We are not yet at that point, but our current modes of discussing “fake news” have left us with a fractured and disoriented public opinion that has been unable to galvanize around a meaningful solution.

Populism and extreme partisanship—discussed in chapters two and three—are additional factors that create a hospitable environment for the spread of fake news. If the populist impulse is to doubt expert and elite opinion—or to conflate expertise with self-interested elitism—then the legitimacy of the mainstream media declines as populism grows. Part of this gulf between “real Americans” and elites may be the result of the decline in local news and the increase in Washington-centric news.⁷ Shifting news coverage to Washington may expand the partisan lens to include previously non-partisan events—a point Lara Brown made in the discussion.⁸

This increase in partisanship not only influences the public but also infects our political leaders. Politicians who we expect to combat propa-

5 Jon Greenberg, “Putin’s Pants-on-Fire Claim About \$400 million donation to Clinton from Bill Browder Partners,” *Politifact*, July 16, 2018, <https://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2018/jul/16/vladimir-putin/putins-pants-fire-claim-about-400-million-donation/>.

6 Another form of “fake news” are the inauthentic news sites that steal content from legitimate and reputable news organizations and then plant false stories among this accurate (but stolen) content, hoping to give fake stories the guise of legitimacy by its proximity to fact-based news. For the most part, the propagandist doesn’t need to go to these lengths, as the same dynamic takes place on social media, with fake news sitting side by side with legitimate news.

7 On page 17, Tom Rosenstiel pointed out that in the last 15 years the number of journalists in D.C. has increased, while the overall number of journalists has decreased by 35 percent.

8 Discussion in the History and Fake News discussion section, pages 17-18.

ganda and conspiracy theories are all too aware of how misinformation helps or hurts them politically. Like many things today “fake news” has become partisan. Extreme partisanship is like a co-pathology that develops alongside fake news—they protect each other and produce an environment where both can thrive.

In Chapter 4, we address additional environmental factors that get in the way of treating this pathology, including the financial and ideological goals of the tech companies—Facebook, Google, Twitter, etc.—who provide a platform for fake news. More important than the immediate profit these companies get from selling ads on fake news posts is their larger ideological vision and their long-term finances. Many tech companies, such as Facebook, are wary of taking editorial responsibility for the content on their sites. Instead of being viewed as media companies who can be held responsible for what appears on their pages, they want to be seen as—in the words of Mark Zuckerberg— “a platform for all ideas.”⁹ They want to be seen as the printing press and not the newspaper. There is reason to believe that this line is beginning to change with the removal of Alex Jones’s *Infowars* from iTunes, Facebook, Spotify, and Twitter. But, it should be noted that *Infowars* was technically removed because it violated the platforms’ “hate speech” terms and conditions—not because it was “fake news.”

In addition to linguistic vagueness, extreme partisanship, the rise of populism, and the lack of editorial oversight on social media, the authors and participants identified a fifth factor that contributed to an environment that is hospitable to fake news— anonymity. Soviet propaganda rarely made its way into the mainstream press because journalists typically required reputable sources for their information. Today, Russia can hack the DNC and release the information anonymously and every news organization covers it. Even if other forms of Russian propaganda are not widely believed by the American public, their misinformation campaign contributes to the overall pollution of the information ecosystem. As Russian dissident and chess champion Garry Kasparov pointed out, “If you can convince people that real news is fake, it becomes much easier to convince them that your fake news is real.”¹⁰

9 Quote taken from Mark Zuckerberg’s Congressional testimony, “Mark Zuckerberg Testimony,” *The New York Times*, April 10, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/10/us/politics/mark-zuckerberg-testimony.html>.

10 Garry Kasparov, Twitter, February 26, 2017, <https://twitter.com/kasparov63/status/835962669442215945?lang=en>.

The effects of Russian propaganda on the 2016 election are debatable—it's not clear if we are overemphasizing the impact of Russian fake news attacks, or if we are under-appreciating their severity. Their propaganda represented a minute fraction of the overall political messaging in the 2016 Presidential campaign, but some highly respectable scholars, including Kathleen Hall Jamieson, have argued that Russian fake news and the leaking of hacked DNC emails tipped the election.¹¹

Walter Lippmann's and Charles Merz advice from *A Test of the News* (1920) seems prescient—we must be weary of allowing our hopes and fears to distort our understanding of events. This holds not only for partisans who want to delegitimize Trump's presidency, but also for the "expert" commentators, pollsters, and academics who predicted Trump's defeat in 2016 and who, naturally, want an explanation for why their prediction was wrong. We all must be cautious about accepting conclusions that we want to be true.

Even if technology companies take steps to further restrict foreign propaganda and the most hateful forms of false news, social media is still the most perfect delivery vehicle for misinformation that the world has ever seen. As has been pointed out throughout this volume, the propaganda and misinformation of the pre-internet era had to get through gatekeeping editors to reach the public. Of course, there were alternative distribution methods outside of the mainstream media, such as papering a city with a self-published pamphlet, but this was expensive and lacked legitimacy. Today, propaganda and misinformation appear on social media next to legitimate news stories. It's as if Moscow, Don Draper, the John Birch Society, and your paranoid neighbor all had a column that appeared alongside legitimate and reputable news.

As the essays by Ryan Thornburg and David Karpf show, along with the discussion on technology, the early idealism about the internet has been replaced by a somber realization of the costs of this new information ecosystem. As we grapple with the current problems of "fake news," we have to keep in mind that the same tools that have allowed misinformation to run wild have also helped neglected minority voices gain a seat at the table. Propaganda and rumor have been elevated in this new ecosystem, but so have legitimate underrepresented viewpoints. In short, freedom of speech has become freer—for better and for worse.

It has yet to be seen where this de-coupling of news stories from news organizations will lead. If today's popular social media platforms

11 Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Cyberwar: How Russian Hackers and Trolls Helped Elect a President—What We Don't, Can't, and Do Know* (Cambridge, Oxford Press, 2018).

become so corrupted with mis-information and propaganda, there could be a backlash against this publishing free-for-all and new social media platforms with higher editorial standards could develop.

Unfortunately, there are reasons to believe that the flurry of disinformation swarming around our information ecosystem will get more polluted and harder to detect in the years to come. Imagine a data dump of 50,000 authentic pages of documents intermixed with five pages of forgeries. We not only have to be skeptical of the veracity of documents, but we have to learn to look at video evidence in a new way. The so-called “deepfake” video has already arrived and will undoubtedly get more sophisticated.¹² The deepfake technical capabilities have been building for decades (i.e. the realistic CGI dinosaurs in *Jurassic Park* back in 1993), but what has changed is the barrier of entry. What used to cost millions of dollars is now available in a low-cost, or free, smart phone app. For example, Snapchat is offering a “face swap” feature. This technology has the potential to turn the average video editor into a puppet master who can realistically control the words and movement of anyone who appears in a video.

This is not just a problem for the casual media consumer who refuses to spend 30 seconds fact-checking a story—it is also a problem for journalists and international diplomats. For example, when a fabricated news report falsely stated that the Israelis had threatened a nuclear attack against Pakistan if they sent troops to Syria, the Pakistani defense minister responded to this false news by Tweeting that “Israel forgets Pakistan is a Nuclear state too.”¹³ The urge to respond quickly and forcefully will need to be restrained by the necessity of verifying and clarifying.

The deepfake will undoubtedly be used to justify action on false pretense—imagine a deepfake video spreading across Myanmar social media of Aung San Suu Kyi calling for an immediate extermination of the Rohingya Muslims—it would almost certainly lead to countless acts of violence. The deepfake will also become a new form of plausible deniability for politicians, celebrities, business executives—anyone who is caught on video doing something nefarious. We may be entering an age where video evidence—seeing a recording of someone doing something—no longer has the persuasive power it once did.

12 Kevin Roose, “Here Come The Fake Videos, Too,” *The New York Times*, March 4, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/04/technology/fake-videos-deepfakes.html>.

13 Russell Goldman, “Reading Fake News, Pakistani Minister Directs Nuclear Threat At Israel,” December 24, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/24/world/asia/pakistan-israel-khawaja-asif-fake-news-nuclear.html>.

One possible solution may be for journalists to start communicating more directly with each other to identify deepfakes and other misinformation—there is no advantage for a reputable news organization to be the first to publish fake news, and the dangers of a reputation-ruining slip to all legitimate news could promote new forms of cooperation.¹⁴

Another possible solution is for social media platforms—either newly created or existing—to accept more editorial oversight of their content. It is possible to imagine a day when the media ecosystem on Facebook is so degraded that users turn to a new online platform that has higher editorial standards. What this will look like is up to the imagination; one possibility would be for reputable news organizations to get together and decide that they are tired of losing ad revenue to Facebook and are tired of having their stories appear side-by-side with misinformation, so they pull their content from Facebook and start a new social media platform that is collectively owned and operated by the news organizations. One variation of this idea is *Civil*—a blockchain based news marketplace that is still in its early stages. This may seem slightly utopian, but it is undeniable that we are in a period of drastic change and something new will arise. If the meteoric trajectory of Facebook and others has taught us anything, it should show us how a seemingly far-fetched idea can go from a technologist's pipe dream to global force in a matter of years.

In the short term, we must guard against false information leading to further polarization. We are exposed to countless news and social media posts that demonize those with opposing viewpoints. If we allow ourselves to be influenced by false or sensational stories that *feel* true, whether they be about Trump or the Trump “resistance,” this escalates our most divisive pre-existing beliefs. Even if we do not believe fake partisan news stories, the exposure to partisan fearmongering may weaken our faith in a common humanity and turn us towards a populist factionalism of liberal versus conservative, or rich versus poor, or elites versus everyone else.

Perhaps the worst thing that could happen would be to let a cynicism of all things take hold.¹⁵ We must keep in mind Garry Kasparov's advice that the main purposes of “fake news isn't to convince anyone exactly what the truth is, but to make people doubt that the truth exists, or

¹⁴ This suggestion, along with some of the background information on “deepfakes,” was informed by a conference panel, “Into The Deep Fake,” that included Maxim Pozdorovkin, Lee Foster, Sam Gregory, Edward Klaris, and Robert Maguire, at the Double Exposure Investigative Film Festival in Washington D.C., October 12, 2018.

¹⁵ Paul Mihailidis emphasized this point in his essay and throughout the discussion.

that it can ever be known.” The larger purpose is “to exhaust your critical thinking, to annihilate truth.”¹⁶

As we try to awaken citizens to the problems of misinformation, we must also imagine potential positive paths forward. As was pointed out in the introduction by Hamilton and Brown, without understanding the characteristics of “real” or verifiable fact-based news it is difficult to identify propaganda, conspiracy theories, partisan spin, and other forms of deceit. To combat misinformation, we may all have no choice but to sharpen our critical thinking abilities and more strictly adhere to verifiable evidence. This would require an epistemic shift away from immediate certainty and towards a slower moving and more cautious form of truth.

¹⁶ Michael Judge, “Q&A: Gary Kasparov On The Press And Propaganda In Trump’s America,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, https://www.cjr.org/q_and_a/kasparov-trump-russia-propaganda.php.

Thank you to the following people for their leadership in making the symposium and report possible:

*At the Reilly Center for Media & Public Affairs at the
Manship School of Mass Communication*

Mary Chiapetta, Tim Klein, and Jennifer Korth

*At the George Washington University
Graduate School of Political Management*

Sarah Gunel, Kay Martinez, and Rachel Neurohr

Transcripts by Gary Euellat Olender Reporting, Inc.,
Washington, D.C.

Design by LSU Graphic Design Student Office (GDSO)



Manship School of
Mass Communication
Reilly Center For
Media & Public Affairs

The Graduate School
of Political Management

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY



Manship School of
Mass Communication
Reilly Center For
Media & Public Affairs

222A Journalism Building, Baton Rouge, LA 70803
lsu.edu/reillycenter

The Graduate School of Political Management

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

805 21st St NW, Washington, DC 20052
gspm.gwu.edu