F for Fake: Propaganda! Hoaxing! Hacking! Partisanship! and Activism! in the Fake News Ecology

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If we are not serious about facts and what's true and what's not, if we can't discriminate between serious arguments and propaganda, then we have problems.
President Barack Obama (Nov. 18, 2016)

The leaks are real but the news is fake.
President Donald Trump (Feb. 16, 2017)

Situating Fake News

In the wake of the 2016 US presidential election, a maelstrom of critical commentary has emerged on the unprecedented circulation of "fake news" stories in/across popular and mainstream media (Albright; Dewey; Silverman & Singer-Vine; Taub; Tufekci). Expansive news coverage of the phenomenon emerged in large part due to a perceived flaw in the architecture of Facebook's algorithmic gatekeeping practices; the social media giant, it would seem, had become a key distributor of fake news by becoming the Web's biggest traffic referrer to fake news sites (Wong). Despite the sustained attention aroused by the Facebook election controversy, media scrutiny was inherently broad: reportage focused on the impacts of fake news on the election (how false news accounts had outperformed real news), the practitioners and Web sites that profited greatly from its circulation, the methods through which citizens could debunk or defuse false information, and the means through which fake news would continue unabated well beyond the din of the US election.

The recent popular media debates surrounding the ubiquity of fake news constitute but one moment in a much longer history of examining, documenting, and contextualizing the proliferation of false news and information. Based on even a cursory overview of scholarship on propaganda (Ellul; Herman and Chomsky; Cunningham; Mirrlees), pseudo-events (Boorstin; Davies; Kent, Harrison and Taylor), or more recent accounts of the broad proliferation of fake news (Rampton and Stauber; Farsetta and Price; Goodman and Goodman; Manjoo; Khaldarova and Pantti), the above controversy is but a continuation of deeply systemic patterns that bolster the transmission of information of questionable integrity and value. The growing complexity of fake news production and dissemination is further exacerbated by the wide range of actors currently cementing the form into a ubiquitous mode of public discourse—propagandists, hoaxers, hackers, partisans, and

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activists. The twenty-first century era of fake news is increasingly bolstered by economic, technological, social, and political factors, making it a highly adaptive cultural form that continues to elude regulation and reform.

The 2016 US Presidential Election

Donald Trump's election win in November 2016 was considered by many a shocking, controversial, and unexpected final result. Just as Hillary Clinton was poised to become the first American female president, the Trump team's push in the final weeks of the campaign[1] served to solidify his base and to catapult him to the nation's highest office (Winston). An expansive chorus of commentators readily dismissed his chances of winning: *The Washington Post* asserted as early as March 2016 that he would "(almost certainly) never be elected president" (Sargent); *The Nation, Slate, The Observer, Politico*, and countless other news outlets sought to reassure their readerships that a Trump win would not come to pass. *The Independent* went so far as to as wager that it was mathematically impossible[2] for Trump to win (Cranston). Even the Australian Government was blindsided by Trump's election, with internal documents citing there were "no signs" he could defeat Hillary Clinton; as a result, Malcolm Turnbull's government was sorely unprepared to engage in policy discussions with the Trump Administration.[3] Trump's unlikely ascension earned him *Time*'s "Person of the Year" magazine cover and the arguably unflattering title of "President of the Divided States of America."

Trump's outsider, anti-establishment win would immediately warrant further inquiry and debate to account for what many perceived to be an anomalous outcome. The discourse surrounding the fake news election controversy is instructive because it reveals some of the key dynamics, characteristics, and contradictions tied to the phenomenon. The propagation of fake news stories across far-reaching and influential sites such as

Facebook quickly became a focal point in mainstream media news coverage. The first wave of reportage framed Facebook's role in stark terms, positioning the company as "help[ing] spread misinformation and fake news stories that influenced how the American electorate voted" (Isaac). Elsewhere, one of the most newsworthy themes to appear following Trump's election involved a chorus of commenters citing Facebook as a major (if not the sole) proponent of Trump's win.[4] Beyond the pale of pundit commentary, even the reluctant boast of a highly successful fake news-writer garnered considerable media attention. Paul Horner, the self-proclaimed fake news impresario, offered up this quotable headline: "I think Donald Trump is in the White House because of me" (qtd. in Dewey). For the likes of Horner, the sheer ubiquity of fake news stories may have catapulted Trump's bid in the final weeks of the campaign by emboldening his base to believe wildly inaccurate stories about his detractors or the likelihood of a Trump win. The platform on which Horner gained the greatest degree of notoriety, Facebook, facilitated the transmission of these stories. One such story, shared almost a million times and likely visible to tens of millions, claimed that Pope Francis (a well-known refugee advocate) endorsed Trump (Tufekci qtd. in Isaac). This story has relevance in relation to other pre-election fake news. As Craig Silverman reported, "20 top-performing false election stories from hoax sites and hyperpartisan blogs generated 8,711,000 shares, reactions, and comments on Facebook" (Silverman, "This Analysis") during the final three months of the campaign.[5] Within the same time period, the twenty best-performing election stories from nineteen major news Web sites generated a total of 7,367,000 shares, reactions, and comments on Facebook (Silverman, "This Analysis"). Thus, in the final months of the campaign, fake news stories of various stripes were making the rounds on Facebook, inspiring an impressive number of discursive responses that cannot be easily dismissed.

Responding to the perceived magnitude of Facebook's role in bringing false news stories to greater prominence, Mark Zuckerberg issued this

statement in the days following the election: "Of all the content on Facebook, more than 99% of what people see is authentic. Only a very small amount is fake news and hoaxes …. Overall, this makes it extremely unlikely hoaxes changed the outcome of this election in one direction or the other" (Zuckerberg). Seeing as 44% of Americans now get their news and information from Facebook ("News Use"), Zuckerberg is either remiss, slow, or unwilling to acknowledge both the scope and the severity of the problem. Discounting the very real threat false information poses for everyday sense-making and democratic governance, the proliferation of "biased information—misleading in nature, typically used to promote or publicize a particular political cause or point of view" (Lotan)—appears to have been more prevalent than fake news during the election.

Such stories occupy a significant place in the broader news and information environment, one increasingly characterized by "alternative facts" in a "post-truth" era.[6] Postman's work on media ecology can be applied here, as fake news represents a discursive apparatus that is currently giving form to "a culture's politics, social organization, and habitual ways of thinking" ("Humanism" 10). In fact, fake news's place within a more diffuse news and information ecology has amplified the degree to which all news participates in what Hartley calls the "primary sense-making practice of modernity" (32). How we make sense of the contemporary (political) climate is contingent on a number of factors, and Scolari's insights regarding how consumers of media (readers, viewers, and users) coevolve with multiple media suggest that the expansion of fake news narratives can precipitate a shift in how citizens construct competing worldviews (215). At the time of writing, some journalists have taken to describe fake news as a catch-all term co-opted by politicians to mean anything they disagree with (Carson), while others have used the phrase to point to the growing normalization of lying and dishonesty in the political sphere (Crines), with both sets of practices used to undermine the legitimacy of democratic deliberation and debate. Theorizing fake news as participating in the muddying of traditional news discourse affords another vantage point from which to consider the actors, outcomes, and solutions to this problematic arm of democratic discourse.

Fake News as Propaganda

Fake news represents information of various stripes that is presented as real but is patently false, fabricated, or exaggerated to the point where it no longer corresponds to reality; what is more, this information operates in the express interests of deceiving or misleading a targeted or imagined audience.[7] There are a variety of reasons underpinning the desire to deceive or mislead (discussed in greater detail below), and one of the most vital elements inscribed into the production of fake news is that it is never a static entity: some fake news producers ensure that the revelation of fakery is built into the architecture of their work; others invite skepticism but ask their publics to do much of the interpretive legwork; and a far greater number of these figures produce false news narratives and accompanying images in the express interests of promoting falsehoods.

To connect fake news to propaganda is useful as a point of departure for understanding the basic contours of its overall makeup.[8] For fake news to be understood as propaganda, making distinctions between overt and covert forms of disinformation is warranted. In *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* (1965), Jacques Ellul elaborates his theory of "total propaganda," in which an organized group avails itself of multiple media platforms and outlets to recruit the active and/or passive participation of a mass of individuals (61). Under this model, propaganda can be seen to unify disparate groups through psychological manipulation and incorporation. Propaganda expresses differences in both degree (continuous, all-encompassing) and purpose (politicization, agitation, deception), thus embodying overt and covert

forms. Overt propaganda (or "white propaganda") refers to open, transparent forms of propaganda, whose aims and intentions are on full display; both the source (e.g., Ministry of Propaganda) and the significance (to influence public opinion) of the propaganda are made explicitly clear, all the while conveying a strong civic good (identifying and attacking the enemy) (17). Dmitry Tulchinskiy, bureau chief of Russian state news agency Rossiya Segodnya, recently argued that "propaganda is the tendentious presentation of facts … It does not mean lying" (Troianovski). Propaganda is thus not "unproblematically untrue": propagandists may falsify facts, be selective with facts, and/or present facts in an "emotive manner" (Edgar and Sedgwick 313–14).

Covert propaganda, on the other hand, "tends to hide its aims, identity, significance, and source. The people are not aware that someone is trying to influence them, and do not feel that they are being pushed in a certain direction" (15). This "black propaganda"[9] constitutes a slippery form of "indirect incitement," a strategy that the states-person adopts to push forward a course of action that s/he proposes and supports. To ensure (passive) acceptance and compliance, the elected official exerts a coercive influence to bring his/her propagandized public into the (ideological) fold (16–17). These two dominant kinds of propaganda are by no means static. As Ellul argues, overt and covert propaganda do not exist independently of one another; rather the combination and coexistence of both forms amplify the propagandist's campaign, leaving individuals and groups susceptible to powerful methods/modes of persuasion.

The central defining tensions ascribed to propaganda are cast in two distinct ways: as a mode of persuasion that connects to good intellectual practice and democracy and as an exercise in manipulation that goes against basic democratic precepts (democratic persuasion versus undemocratic propaganda) (Jensen 270). At its worst, propaganda serves to instill widespread compliance among citizens, workers, and consumers (Lazere 7); at its best, it is regarded as a tool to mobilize and guide a disparate citizenry

toward a greater common good (Auerbach 3). A recent wave of scholarship seeks to situate the study of propaganda as a vehicle for "building intelligent resistance through understanding … [cultivating] methods for improving critical thinking … [and] examining where and how participatory democracy [is] negated by particular manipulators located strategically in key institutions and channels of public expression" (Sproule 267).

While it is tempting to reduce all fake news to either overt or covert propaganda, it would be misguided. Fake news dissemination is not limited to state-controlled or state-allied media organizations, nor is it spread by governments and corporate news media alone. The everyday realities of fake news assume even greater significance when we understand that this information acquires authenticity when it is produced and shared by everyday Internet users or by the likes of AI robots. Indeed, to spread fake news is "an act rewarded by social media platforms by metrics such as attention, popularity and visibility" (Mejias). As Caplan observes, fake news occupies a range of floating registers and modalities: "[it] consists of misleading headlines, deceptive edits, consensus-based truth making in communities like reddit or 8chan, or by the absorption of fake news by political figures, like Donald Trump, who have the power to make fake news *newsworthy*." Problematic content can shift from text- to image-/visual-based media, signaling the robust and evolving nature of how such manipulations persist (boyd). Put another way, fake news can be decidedly specific or diffuse. It is thus unsurprising that the propagation of fake news online has been likened "to the evolution and transmission of infectious diseases" (Kucharski). As one medical researcher observes, much like "disease strains can evolve and compete in a host population, much like rumors, and infections and opinions are both shaped by social contacts … the diversity of circulating strains can increase" (Kucharski). To account for this diversity, it is also useful to position fake news in relation to another deceptive cultural practice: media hoaxing.

Fake News as Media Hoaxing

The year 2016 also saw a continued spike in media hoaxing activities, particularly online, where deceptive stories of various stripes circulated widely. To explore fake news as a form, facet, or byproduct of media hoaxing is also instructive. While fake news is consistently cast as deliberately false or misleading information and more generally described as propaganda, media hoaxing has earned a reputation as being on the mischievous end of this broader project.[10] *The Concise Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) refers to hoaxing as "a humorous or mischievous deception, usually taking the form of a fabrication of something fictitious or erroneous." Similarly, Collins and Penguin English dictionaries place deception at the center of their respective entries, placing even greater emphasis on the act of playing a joke or trick on someone. Whereas discussions regarding propaganda often hinge on both the severity of the phenomenon and its rote characteristics, hoaxing assumes a more playful, guileful, and trickster sensibility.

As temporal events, hoaxes tend to unfold in stages, revealing a basic structure. Secor and Walsh offer a succinct overview:

> Something is made public, people react, taking it seriously, then somehow the rug is pulled away, and people first suspect, then realize that they have been fooled. Sometimes a state of uncertainty prevails, and the event just fades from public consciousness; sometimes the hoaxer gets unwillingly unmasked much later; sometimes the hoaxer is exposed to public opprobrium; more often, the hoaxer claims credit to construct public notoriety for himself or herself.
>
> (72)

The fine line between overt and covert communication is also evident within the context of hoaxing, but the revelatory aspects tied to the practice as well as the expressly mischievous nature of the act serves to distinguish the latter from propaganda. At its most basic level, hoaxing operates under the guise of "fooling and revealing" in relation to an audience that understands a given hoax as "the real thing" until they are told otherwise (Walsh 167). A hoax must first and foremost resemble the real thing and readers must be "'taken in' by the form and demonstrate a lack of integrity when it comes to evaluating the content" (Collins 78). Hoaxing has thus become an umbrella term for instances where intentions to deceive occur in a one-to-many communication setting, inspiring a host of "new medial challenges or epistemological insecurities" (Busse and Hübler 12).

As Castagnaro has shown, hoaxing enjoys a mutually constituted relationship with establishment journalism: just as journalism sought to establish itself in the nineteenth century as a credible and prestigious profession, hoaxers posed a legitimate threat to its credibility as a purveyor of objective, disinterested news stories (5). Such tensions have continued to mark this storied relationship, with media hoaxers deftly seeking to discredit the more sensationalist pockets of journalistic activity and with journalists eager to use hoaxers as negative exemplars worthy of public consternation for their transgressions. To situate fake news as part of a broader array of media hoaxing practices gives the former added nuance in terms of its context, function, ethos, and impact. Just as propaganda can retain a transparent or opaque relationship to its publics, so too do hoaxes occupy a nebulous standing as consumable information.

The points of connection at once banding together and separating propaganda and hoaxing open the door to understanding the subtler dimensions attached to fake news production and the broader (un)critical discourses that wish to render the term as uniform as possible. For fake news to be theorized and conceptualized beyond the pale of propaganda and false information means that its application is subject to much greater elaboration. Indeed, what binds fake news producers and media hoaxers in the adoption and adaptation of various modes of deception is, to borrow a phrase from boyd, the art of "hacking the attention economy." To hack the attention economy, boyd argues, one must first disrupt the everyday workings of information intermediaries; the act of successfully hacking one's way to attention represents the promise of ensuring greater visibility for one's prowess, personality, and/or

cause. It is precisely in this process of discursive disruption that producers of deceptive information are best able to insert themselves into whatever pockets of influence they deem most attractive or suitable for their ends. To gain a foothold in this attention economy, or what Haile has called the "Attention Web," is (at the very least an attempt) to produce the conditions upon which economic, technological, social, political, and ethical projects are realized. No matter the sophistication or skill of one's fakery, the realization of the latter endeavors is never guaranteed. As Borthwick demonstrates, "To effectively hack media, you need to penetrate and then connect across dense people networks," a feat not easily achieved in today's complex Internet ecosystems. This explains in part why there are currently so many different types of actors involved in the elaboration of fake news culture.

Factors, Motives, and Incentives

With the constant push to produce Internet-based journalism, online news media have engaged in suspect activities to lure readers to their Web sites and platforms, publishing in the process stories of questionable accuracy and integrity. Bait-and-switch headlines have long figured as key editorial strategies for inciting readers to procure newspapers and to click through to news content. Indeed, the notion of producing a misleading headline and revealing the switch in the body of the news story is not the most problematic feature of contemporary journalism, but it does offer another window onto more problematic manifestations of newsroom practices. In the rush to secure readerships and advertising revenues in a deeply competitive twenty-four-hour information environment, establishment journalists are increasingly having to produce work under tighter and tighter deadlines, often publishing several articles daily. Journalists confined to the web have witnessed even greater spikes in their daily news posts, due to rigorous and

stressful demands on writers to produce stories (irrespective of the speed or slowness of a given news day). *Gawker* editor, John Cook, has readily admitted that it would be impossible to vet all of the stories published in his online publication (currently catering to upwards of twenty-five million unique visitors per month) (Klein). As Cook reveals, "We are dealing with a volume of information that it is impossible to have the strict standards of accuracy that other institutions have" (qtd. in Somaiya and Kaufman). To read *Gawker* is to approach news with a greater degree of skepticism and a higher level of sophistication in order to separate truth from falsity and fiction from fantasy. Fact checking has also been regarded as a disadvantage because it necessarily slows down the move toward publishing a lead story. As one bureau chief at *The Huffington Post* admits, "If you throw something up without fact checking it, and you're the first one to put it up, and you get millions and millions of views, and later it's proved false, you still got those views. That's a problem. The incentives are all wrong" (qtd. in Somaiya and Kaufman). Truth and veracity become liabilities in the march toward securing greater and greater page views. Perhaps, the most fitting motto for accuracy in reporting seems to be "publish first, correct if necessary" (an interesting variation of the Apollonian precept, "Shoot first, ask questions later").

Motivated actors seeking to publish fake news are well aware of the pressures, constraints, and opportunities journalists have in the push to secure broader readerships and more robust ad revenues; in fact, their success depends on their ability to exploit these weaknesses. Explaining the factors that influence fake news circulation is greatly contingent on the actors responsible for its creation. The most clearly defined incentives for promoting such stories are economic: because media firms rely on advertising revenues for their continued survival (Napoli) and because spectacular stories (factual or not) drive audience attention and ad revenues, the appearance of such stories will continue as long as this model persists. As one historian puts it, "The structural incentives for

commercial firms are to leave lots of leeway around the truth of stories because they generate ads. And this means that in many ways, 'fake' is becoming our new 'real'" (Turner qtd. in Cutler). So long as ad revenue increases (or remains stable), the veracity and quality of the content seem to matter very little.

Beginning in early 2016, an unnamed eighteen-year-old high school student in Veles, Macedonia, began creating fake news Web sites replete with false information about the US election (Subramanian). Many of the articles he created were shared across the Facebook ecosystem. His most popular Web site earned him $16,000 over the course of just a few months (August–November 2016). In the final weeks of the election, over a hundred Web sites were attributed to the fake news writer (e.g., DonaldTrumpNews.co, NewYorkTimesPolitics. co, USADailyPolitics.com). Of particular note here is that although many of the stories published on these sites were pro-Trump, decisions to favor Trump were not based on ideology, but on economics. Trump supporters were more likely to share the fake stories, thereby increasing the financial rewards for the sites' creator. Creators of fake news have generated such sizeable profit from automated advertising engines like AppNexus, Facebook Ads, and Google AdSense that an entire cottage industry of practitioners has appeared in the wake of the election.

In a representative example, Buzzfeed reports that an emerging wing of fake news production consists of a network of over forty Web sites[11] responsible for more than 750 fake news articles (Silverman and Singer-Vine). For Silverman and Singer-Vine, this network represents "the world's largest and most unique fake news empire." In the United States, practitioners such as Paul Horner,[12] Adam Nicoloff, and Terry Littlepage have amassed small fortunes through their participation in the election cycle circulation of fake news (for Nicoloff, compare $30,000 in monthly revenue with $8,000 in associated costs [Herrman]). Littlepage oversees a team of freelancers and an average of fifty politically themed Facebook pages that connect users to a half-dozen external sites; while he spends an estimated thousand dollars a day on Facebook advertising, he has accrued over ten million followers and, in a good month, takes home $60,000 (Herrman). Despite his claim that he is writing quality satire and would prefer to be mentioned in the same breath as *The Onion*, Horner is prepared to continue his fake news enterprise, even if Google and Facebook were to tighten their stance on known fake news sources; indeed, given the economic incentives, he has alternative sites, names, and content at the ready in the event of an eventual crackdown. According to Pablo Reyes (a fake news publisher at Huzlers.com), the economic logics of fake news production are so attractive that so long as the traffic is real and the ads are reaching real people, advertisers will continue to opt in (Silverman et al.). Within this ecology of cultural production, fake news consumption is motivated through the clickbait logic of shares, likes, and clicks (Caplan) and is stimulated by invested actors, automated accounts, and mass automation tools (Borthwick). Most importantly, both the real and imagined accumulation of capital are significant driving forces in this controversial endeavor.

Technological

The technological dimensions associated with fake news production and dissemination have brought two major concerns to the fore: first, media companies such as Facebook exercise unparalleled control over the process through which fake news (and its accompanying data) is leveraged; second, the increasing use of complex proprietary algorithms has deepened the degree and influence with which echo chambers, filter bubbles, and hyperpartisan commentary persist (Bozdag; Mager). The first point surrounding the accountability for, and transparency of, how data is shaped through the algorithmic tailoring of user preference and customization has garnered a great deal of attention because algorithms created by corporate media firms are likened to a black box. This line of inquiry is crucial because these firms alone exercise complete control over this

infrastructure. As Tufekci points out, only Facebook can accurately reveal the extent to which fake news is spreading, how much of it currently exists, who reads and creates it, and how much influence it may have. Access to these data sets is extremely limited. Pasquale's broader concerns about black box society (closed, proprietary, and unaccountable systems of data capture) should be repeated: "Shouldn't we know when [media firms are] working for us, against us, or for unseen interests with undisclosed motives?" (77).

The problems are not limited to a lack of available data from which to better assess a burgeoning fake news ecology. Algorithms can agnostically promote the spread of disinformation since they are designed to promote things based on popularity, not accuracy (Mejias). These highly spreadable forms of news exist "primarily within the feeds of the already converted, its authorship obscured, its provenance unclear, its veracity questionable" (Herrman). Because these news items are promoted across densely populated social networks, the promotion of popular stories online (truthful or not) is giving rise to increased polarization, hyperpartisan bias, and influence. Amplified by homophily and bolstered by algorithmic recommendation systems (Lotan), hyperpartisan news dissemination is assisting in the cultivation of insular realities via filter bubbles and echo chambers (Pariser). Users are not only unwittingly exposed to news that confirms or extends their biases, they are also more likely to interface with like-minded individuals with whom to share their worldviews (Herrman). As McLeod states, "people embrace falsehoods when they feel authentic and resonate with their belief systems" (132). More than this, rather than evaluate a story's credibility directly, people will defer to trustworthy figures in their network to judge a story's relevance and veracity to fill in the gaps in their knowledge (Taub). People may often think of algorithms as autonomous, unbiased, and impartial (Bozdag; Gillespie), but in actuality, they participate in the codification and computation of assumptions about users' values (Schlute 248). The implications are stark: the explicit personalization of user data feeds can undermine deliberative

democracy by limiting one's exposure to contradictory views or information (Sunstein). With the influx of fake news narratives, the potential negative impacts on informed deliberation and debate are even greater.

Hacking, Pranking, and Vilification

The terms hacks, hackers, and hacking have all punctuated to some extent the US presidential election. Hacks carried out by Cozy Bear, a group with ties to Russia's FSB spy agency, and Fancy Bear, Russian military intelligence, produced thousands of confidential emails stolen from the Democratic National Committee (DNC), which they later shared via Wikileaks (Gayle). The leaks have been attributed in part to the concerted efforts of hackers looking to lure top-ranking Democrats through phishing emails (Harding). Add to this the concerted efforts of over 15,000 Russian dissidents running political interference through the mass dissemination of false news stories and conspiracy theories online (Pegues). The CIA has since concluded that these activities were carried out in the express interests of influencing the election and in bolstering Trump's bid (Gayle). Most recently, a last-minute email leak in the French presidential election in May 2017 attempted to sow doubt and spread disinformation about presidential frontrunner Emmanuel Macron (Greenberg; Hern). As Macron's En Marche! party officials confirmed, hackers obtained diverse information (email, documents, contracts, and accounting). Importantly, of the 9GB "data dump," the leak represents a mix of authentic and fabricated documents (Greenberg; Hern). In this context, the profusion of fake documents creates the conditions for fake news to materialize. The heady mix of email phishing and information leaks, as well as political interference and false news dissemination places the fake news phenomenon uncomfortably at the periphery of hacking practices. At a moment when the synergies between journalism and hacking are slowly

taking root (bringing reporters and journalists to the table to share goals, skills, tools, and practices) (Di Salvo), the latter practice can just as easily be conflated with cybercrime and infamy (Raspopina). As Deibert explains, a hacker has come to be understood by the FBI "as someone who 'conducts cyber intrusions to obtain trade secrets, financial information, or sensitive information', while a *hacktivist* is 'someone who conducts a cybercrime to communicate a politically or socially motivated message'" (226). Within the realm of fake news dissemination, the fluidity of the hacker identity as "pliable, performative and fluid" seems most applicable (Fish and Follis qtd. in Di Salvo).

The perpetuation of false information by way of fake news stories, hoaxes, and data leaks can also be linked to broader pranking activities. For McLeod, "Pranks allow people with few monetary resources to turn media outlets into their own personal megaphone" (136). The creation of fake news is thus also informed by a desire to engage in the *lulz*, what Coleman describes as "a deviant style of humor and a quasi-mystical state of being," and as a darker form of mischief making that usually comes at someone's expense and occasionally borders on disturbing or hateful speech (2, 31). The most common examples appear on Web sites that boast users who are eager to share; one such example is AmericanNews.com, a site that at present has 5.5 million Facebook followers (700,000 more subscribers than *The Washington Post*) (Collins). They are responsible for publishing the following: "Michelle Obama Exposed for the Pervert She Really Is," "Denzel Washington Backs Trump in the Most Epic Way Possible," and "BREAKING: Hillary Clinton to Be Indicted…Your Prayers Have Been Answered." Together these stories participate in the ungrounded vilification of public figures through an irreverent style that seeks to capture a spirit of "ultracoordinated motherfuckery" (Coleman 6). Based on the practitioner and his/her aims, targets materialize from across the political spectrum. Indeed, a common theme among fake newswriters interviewed following the election is that of one-upmanship. In this universe,

Hillary Clinton sells passport-making machines directly to ISIS and Barack Obama refrains from using the term "Radical Islam" for fear of breaking an Islamic Spell he believes to be protected by (Chacon). As fake newswriter Horner attests, "I was trying to damage Trump's campaign by writing stuff that was just ridiculous, to make his followers and supporters look like fools. Everything I wrote mocked Trump. But they just wanted the stories to be true, and instead of making them look like idiots, they just kept on sharing it" (Hedegaard). One unfortunate blowback from the wide unchecked circulation of pranks is that playfully misleading and downright deceptive information has a way of (re-)emerging as future "proof" or "evidence" regarding real accounts of any given phenomenon (McLeod 161).

Social Commentary and Social Justice

With all of the above manifestations of fake news commanding attention across various pockets of public discourse, it is crucial to remind readers that fake news remains for many the umbrella term for a special strand of political satire—news parody—its roots readily traced to Comedy Central's *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, the self-proclaimed "most trusted name in fake news." Since the early 2000s, political satirists have deployed the "fake news" genre to challenge and subvert the codes and conventions of traditional journalism through a number of ironic and parodic appropriations, in the interests of revealing the inconsistencies, inaccuracies, and failures of mainstream media reportage (Reilly, "Satirical Fake News" 259). During this period, scholars have greatly expanded scholarship in the converging realms of politics and entertainment; more specifically, a wide range of studies exploring the relationship between political entertainment media and traditional political media have emerged.[13] Indeed, satirical fake news scholarship has produced conflicting accounts of its impact(s) on contemporary culture. Negative accounts of the

phenomenon situate fake news as enhancing cynicism (Baumgartner and Morris) and distrust (Guggenheim, Kwak and Campbell); viewer gains in political knowledge are modest at best (Baek and Wojcieszak), and viewer tolerance for and exposure to diverse news and information is low (Stroud and Muddiman). Broader attempts to empirically explain its significance in terms of small, cumulative, or long-term effects on democracy have also been unsatisfactory (Holbert). When satirical fake news is perceived to be real, these narratives enhance viewer "feelings of inefficacy, alienation, and cynicism toward politicians" (Balmas).

To complete the picture, scholars of fake news have also identified the form as an important global voice (Baym and Jones) in the articulation of social criticism and social justice. Due to its explicit ties to journalism, fake news offers significant opportunities to galvanize an informed citizenry grounded in common sense (Boler), to enact a model of deliberative democracy (Baym), to expand the range and breadth of mainstream media news discourse (Day, "And Now"; Jones; McKain), to interrogate power through "heterogeneous and nonconventional approaches to reporting on politicians and political issues" (Harrington; Berkowitz and Schwartz), to function as media criticism (Borden and Tew), and to serve as a critical check on Fourth Estate journalism (Sotos).

Just as social commentary occupies an important place in the broader articulation of fake news praxis, so too has social justice shown to be of growing interest to activist practitioners. For activists to gain access, garner attention, or win favor in contemporary news media (even momentarily), they have begun to explore the potential impact(s) of fake news, framing these endeavors as examples of "hacking in the public interest" (Powell). Media activists such as the Yes Men and activist groups tied to the Yes Lab for Creative Activism have come to adopt fake news as a tactic in the creation of ethically motivated social justice campaigns (Boyd and Mitchell; Day, S*atire and Dissent*; Haugerud). In cultivating these tactics, these groups have been able to shed light on and increase visibility for social justice issues. For example, the Yes Men spearheaded the publication of two mainstream news parodies of the *New York Times* (2008) and the *New York Post* (2009) to draw attention to environmental degradation and corporate malfeasance, among many other contemporary issues. By re-imagining mainstream news as a vehicle for social justice, parody and news satire offer an instance where activist practitioners of fake news can move "beyond dystopian critique to explore utopian alternatives that bridge awareness and civic engagement" (Reilly, "From Critique" 1256). With the factors, motives, and incentives underpinning fake news production now firmly established, one is left to ponder the immediate and future impacts the form may have.

Perceptions of and Possibilities for Fake News

For creators, writers, and publishers of fake news, the activities from which to choose are inherently broad—propaganda-making, hoaxing, hacking, partisanship, and activism—and the terrain shows great malleability. Despite the breadth of application of this cultural form, the common chorus among those studying the phenomenon can be distilled via the following question: How do we curb and/or stop the circulation of fake news stories? In the majority of accounts, the propagandist is readily cast as a "self-motivated cultural and political actor [who] purposely manipulates the gullible audience and distorts what would otherwise be an open marketplace of ideas" (Neuman 45). As many factors show, the reach of fabricated stories is potentially vast, the retraction of stories is extremely limited,[14] and citizens are vulnerable to manipulation. According to a recent Pew study, fake news is creating confusion, with Internet users knowingly and unwittingly sharing fake news (Barthel et al.); for example, middle and high school students have difficulty identifying fake news or determining bias (Donald).

A number of solutions have been proposed. Since the election (and under great public pressure), Facebook has recently committed to hiring 3,000 moderators, of which a yet undetermined number of these new employees will serve as fact checkers (Goel; Silverman, "Facebook Is Turning"). Following suit, mainstream news organizations have slowly begun assembling teams of fact checkers and investigative units. For example, *The Independent* has launched a five-person team with a mandate to debunk fake news (Davies); conservative news media (*The Weekly Standard*) are staffing up and increasing resources for fact checking, with an editorial goal to base all arguments on facts, logic, and reason (Rutenberg). Both Google and Facebook have begun instituting software and human-driven mechanisms to identify and quarantine fake news (Mejias). Technology firms and software developers have created browser detectors to help identify and flag suspicious content (Fake News Alert, Hoaxy, B.S. Detector). Researchers in the European Union have jointly launched a public data project that will map the flow of fake news (see "Field Guide to Fake News"). University libraries across North America have produced critical resources and guides for detecting fake news. An emphasis on common sense engagement with information consumption has been spurred by a revival of interest in concepts like "crap detection" (Postman, "Bullshit"; Rheingold) and "baloney detection" (Sagan).

Despite these interventions, the proposed solutions have already drawn their fair share of criticism: fact checkers may not have the context, knowledge, or bandwidth to address fake news and hoax claims (Caplan); if users alone are responsible for flagging content, debates surrounding user-led censorship are bound to erupt (Mejias); moderators, fact checkers, or algorithms may only be flagging content after the fact, leaving fake news stories sufficient time to circulate. Whatever new policies or regulatory frameworks are created to contain or minimize the proliferation of fake news, invested actors will create inventive workarounds to undermine regulation (boyd). It is no wonder that we are witnessing a wide variety of colliding discourses (all subsumed under the catch-all banner of fake news), but each variant of the form brings its own politics, economics, technological affordances, sociality, and ethics to bear. While these modes of fakery and deception may share general characteristics, their broader agendas may speak to or express vastly different goals and objectives. What is clear is that the reignited debates about fake news represent a vital moment for evaluating the health and vitality of democratic news media, building frameworks for greater information vetting and transparency, and instigating stronger media skepticism and civic engagement.

Notes

1. With "Project Alamo," the Trump digital operations team covertly executed a massive digital last-stand strategy using targeted Facebook ads to "discourage" Hillary Clinton supporters from voting (Winston).

2. For Trump to win, Cranston writes, he must not only win "every state that Mitt Romney and John McCain won before him, but he must win states that they were not able to win" (Cranston).

3. In a telling anecdote, the Australian Prime Minister was so unprepared that he had to rely on golfing legend Greg Norman to produce a personal number for Trump. The Department of Foreign Affairs did not have Trump's contact details on file (McGhee).

4. For representative headlines, see Read ("Donald Trump Won Because of Facebook") and Parkinson ("Click and Elect: How Fake News Helped Donald Trump Win a Real Election").

5. Buzzfeed News would go on to publish a list of 50 of the top-performing fake news stories on Facebook.

6. For representative accounts of alternative facts and post-truth, see Coughlan, Crines, Jackson, Swaine, Tanz, Waldman. For more detailed analyses of these phenomena, see Keyes and Manjoo. As Coughlan notes, "Oxford Dictionaries made ["post-truth"] the word of the year [in 2016], defining it as where 'objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.'"

7. Sauter situates the phenomenon directly in relation to the election when she refers to fake news as "purported news websites that sprung up during the 2016 election, often with the goal of producing salacious, compelling articles, predominantly pro-Trump, to attract clicks and social media shares."

8. As Neuman reminds us, at the conclusion of the Second World War, the field of communication research adopted a paradigm designed to address the "propaganda problem," that is, "the concern about the hypodermic injection of manipulative images and arguments in the perusable public mind," a feature of the contemporary moment that has not diminished in scope or scale (26). The mere threat of propaganda informed the research enterprise.

9. In a contemporary US context, black propaganda is characterized as official lies that are planted in the press to uphold the state's

standing (e.g., embellishing US foreign policy aims abroad); white propaganda refers to the manipulation of journalists and news organizations to bias their reporting in favor of the state's political goals (Mirrlees 140).

10. Interestingly, in what has been called the first book-length study of hoaxing, MacDougall argues that hoaxes can have far-reaching implications with regard to individual and group decision-making, governance, and action: "Throughout history, mobs have formed and become hysterical; governments have fallen, reputations have been made and destroyed; international relations have been strained, and wars have been fought, all as a result of hoaxes which were exposed too late" (qtd. in Castagnaro 13). Under this configuration, all manner of deception falls under the more general banner of hoaxing.

11. Representative examples include National Report, World News Daily Report, Empire News, Daily Buzz Live, The News Nerd, and Huzlers (Hedegaard).

12. Horner describes his own writing of fake news content in this way: "Most of my stuff starts off, the first paragraph is super legit, the title is super legit, the picture is super legit, but then the story just gets more and more ridiculous and it becomes obvious that none of it is true" (Hedegaard).

13. For a representative sample of this scholarship, see "Breaking Boundaries: Working Across the Methodological and Epistemological Divide in the Study of Political Entertainment," a special issue in the *International Journal of Communication* (Young and Gray).

14. Mark Twain is famously credited with a statement that captures this problem with great precision: "A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is still putting on its shoes." It is perhaps ironic that Twain's words unmistakably echo those of C. H. Spurgeon (1820) and Jonathan Swift (1710) before him.

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That the use of 'fake news" in the U.S. represents a deeper political movement shows in the diversity of the coalition which feels attracted to the language. It unites racists, white nationalists, fascists, xenophobes, the conservatively religious, military hawks, exploitative business interests and oligarchs in common cause—which is quite a feat in a political phase where broad coalitions are breaking down everywhere else. Trump has used the term 'fake news" to riff on its historical context and meaning from the very start. What the state or the propaganda calls "fake news" is the media that contradicts their own media. The best evidence against the accusations of fake news is Palestine! This because of lobbyists like aipac and Zionist control of the media. Hoaxing! Hacking! Partisanship! and Activism! in the Fake News Ecology | Find, read and cite all the research you need on ResearchGate. Fake news has become popular in the last few years and appears mainly in the form of alleged news articles that spread via social media or as satire. However, fake news can appear in two additional manifestations: in politics—when falsehoods are generated by politicians; and as a practice of media art—by the activist-art branch 'tactical media'. Fake news websites (also referred to as hoax news websites) are Internet websites that deliberately publish fake news—hoaxes, propaganda, and disinformation purporting to be real news—often using social media to drive web traffic and amplify their effect. Unlike news satire, fake news websites deliberately seek to be perceived as legitimate and taken at face value, often for financial or political gain. Such sites have promoted political falsehoods in India, Germany, Indonesia and the Philippines... F for Fake: Propaganda! Hoaxing! Hacking! Partisanship! and Activism! in the Fake News Ecology. 2018. URL: https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/jacc.12834. [43] Politics. Follow RT for details on 'fake news', which is a term describing a category of propaganda or yellow journalism. The term 'fake news' usually refers to information created to deliberately misinform and confuse people via different types of news outlets or social media – broadcast, print, or online. Fake news is often intended to damage the image of a person, entity, or organization, though it can also be the result of low quality content. News of ex-congressman and defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld's death soon attracted critics of his role in the Iraq War, but when the media described the Bush-era official as all but a victim of circumstance, tempers blew up. Jun 30, 2021 22:23. USA News. 'It's an honor, I voted for you!'