A CRITICAL GUIDE TO FAKE NEWS: FROM COMEDY TO TRAGEDY
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J A Y S O N   H A R S I N

A CRITICAL GUIDE
TO FAKE NEWS: FROM
COMEDY TO TRAGEDY

> "All great world historical facts appear first as comedy, then as tragedy."
>
> Karl Marx

As much as traditionalists and some historians stubbornly protest, the frequent sprouting of widespread neologisms such as fake news, post-truth, and fact-checking point to the inadequacy of existing vocabularies for describing a social world *en plein transformation*. Those three terms particularly speak to the anxieties around epistemic and fiduciary impacts of political and economically embedded new communication technologies and practices. In the following pages, I will briefly pursue the first term, while frequently alluding to the second, and always anticipating the third. Though I often focus on United States examples, I will also provide frequent French and other parallels in a transatlantic overhaul of Metternich's phrase: "When France sneezes, all of Europe catches cold." The U.S. is now the sneezer (fill in the blank for she who catches cold).

Fake News: Whence the term? Whence the phenomenon?

What is fake news? Apparently, many things, from comedy news shows, to satires and parodies, news stories that mix true and false to misleading ends, and stories that are invented and have almost no

basis in fact. Furthermore, the definitions or criteria for discerning fake news from, say, journalism, vary and may include one or all the following: factitious communication blends, such as satire and parody, which are usually accompanied by the qualification that they are fake. Many dictionaries still lack an entry for "fake news." Not *Cambridge Dictionary*, which says, "false stories that appear to be news, spread on the internet or using other media, usually created to influence political views or as a joke."[1] Let this definition start as a launching point to explore epistemological challenges researchers must confront to avoid producing chimeric knowledge about fake news.

First as Farce: *the Daily Show, etc. 1999-?*

Perhaps it makes sense to begin historically. At least as early as 1999, "fake news" was used on a widespread basis as part of the American comedy news (or satire) program *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart, which branded itself openly, and ironically, as "fake news." It was "fake" in the sense that it sometimes imitated the style of "real news" with news segments and reporters who were sent out to do stories or give in-studio commentaries. Even there, it was not entirely fake, if by which we mean entirely invented. On the contrary, it often (and still does with its new host) give bitingly funny news analysis, usually from a left-leaning perspective. It is media criticism that functions especially through satire and parody.[2]

Writers who helped Stewart transform the *Daily Show* in 1999 came from the popular satirical "fake" newspaper *The Onion*, a publication which even today is cited as a problematic source for readers who have trouble distinguishing its often "official," generic-looking news stories from legitimate traditional journalism. While no studies empirically document this shift from fake news as comedy shows like the Daily show and satirical papers like *The Onion*, Google searches (with privacy setting on to mask location and thwart customized results) produce nothing in the top 20 stories that use fake news in this historical sense associated with *The Daily Show* before 1999. The tem itself appears to be almost completely unused before 1999 (just over 100 stories in major

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1. "Fake News," *Cambridge English Dictionary*, accessed September 30, 2017, http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/fake-news.
2. Aaron McKain, "Not Necessarily Not the News: Gatekeeping, Remediation, and The Daily Show," *The Journal of American Culture* 28, no. 4 (2005): 415–30.

Anglophone newspapers, 1990-1998, just before the *Daily Show's* "fake news" brand).[3] Those that do use the term usually refer to a hoax story (something that didn't occur is reported as if it did) that duped traditional newspapers and/or broadcast news and its readers/viewers; or a gag perpetrated by the news media to fool and entertain its audience (as in Orson Welles' notorious *War of the Worlds* 1938 Broadcast). From 1999 to 2007 (sticking with the 8-year span), the number jumps to over 1700, most citing *The Daily Show*. 2008-2012=1800 results. 2013-2015=1600; 2016-2017=2,000+ . By 2016, the term appears to be referring almost exclusively to completely invented or greatly misleading stories—online.

FROM COMEDY TO TRAGEDY

While fake news as comedy exists residually in current uses, it has been overtaken by a different sense of the term. With the growth of the internet and huge shifts in journalism (production values, labor, and audience), and professional and amateur political communicators adapting to the new communication environment, fake news arguably took a more tragic turn.[4]

Once again, what was and is now meant by "fake news?" In my examination of several major emerging studies of fake news, it refers to 1) intent to deceive for political and/or economic ends (the latter, entertainingly); 2) Reuters Digital News annual report for 2017 notes that "Definitions of 'fake news' are fraught with difficulty and respondents frequently mix up three categories: (1) news that is 'invented' to make money or discredit others; (2) news that has a basis in fact, but is 'spun' to suit a particular agenda; and (3) news that people don't feel comfortable about or don't agree with." Meanwhile, the Oxford Institute for the Study of Computational Propaganda defines fake news as "misleading, deceptive or incorrect information, purporting to be real news about politics, economics or culture."[5] Tandoc and colleagues agree that fake news involves intention to deceive. They also note the residual

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3. LexisNexis Academic search: ''LexisNexis® Academic''. Web. 16 Sept. 2017. http://www.lexisnexis.com.

4. I first addressed this turn in print in 2006. See Jayson Harsin, "The Rumour Bomb: Theorising the Convergence of New and Old Trends in Mediated US Politics," *Southern Review: Communication, Politics & Culture* 39, no. 1 (2006): 84-110.

5. Laura Hazard Owen, "Brits and Europeans Seem to Be Better than Americans at Not Sharing Fake News," *Nieman Lab*, June 9, 2017, http://www.niemanlab.org/2017/06/brits-and-europeans-seem-to-be-better-than-americans-at-not-sharing-fake-news/.

use of fake news as satire and parody but note that it distinguishes itself from other content called fake news since it offers disclaimers (if in nothing more than its brand: for example, The Onion). [6] While fake news increasingly refers to deceitful, if not completely false/invented, content, fake news as comedy lives on, but now as a problem: millions of social media users (and occasionally politicians) misrecognize it as professional journalism. [7]

However, a problem in the definitions of fake news lies in its attribution of intent to deceive for political ends. It appears that in the business model of fake news, some fake news producers have intent to deceive *only* in order to make money through the attention/circulation the fake news receives, which has more or less inadvertent political effects (belief, confusion, agenda-setting). They themselves are then exploited by more strategic partisans who hope to see the disinformation spread (and who have no interest in the producer's pecuniary profits). On the other hand, there are producers of fake news who depuis le tout début aim to deceive for political ends (not to make money). But money will be made especially by news organizations (not Macedonian teenagers, to be discussed shortly) [8] that deem it newsworthy, drawing fascinated audiences. The latter was all too obvious when CEO of the venerable U.S. CBS news proclaimed regarding the popularity of Trump and his rumor bombing-/fake news-driven candidacy: "It may not be good for America, but it's damn good for CBS." [9] Thus we can say that fake news originates from two different sets of interests, which become interwoven: economic aims-political effects, and political aims-economic effects.

I F   I T   L O O K S   A N D   Q U A C K S   L I K E   A   D U C K …

Is fake news then simply defined in the intentionality to mislead? Must its product *look* in presentation like professional journalism (writing

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6. Edson C. Tandoc Jr, Zheng Wei Lim, and Richard Ling, "Defining 'Fake News,'" *Digital Journalism* 0, no. 0 (August 30, 2017): 1–17.

7. Emmett Rensin, "The Great Satirical-News Scam of 2014," *The New Republic*, June 6, 2014, https://newrepublic.com/article/118013/satire-news-websites-are-cashing-gullible-outraged-readers.

8. Samanth Subramanian, "Meet the Macedonian Teens Who Mastered Fake News and Corrupted the US Election," *WIRED*, February 15, 2017, https://www.wired.com/2017/02/veles-macedonia-fake-news/.

9. "Leslie Moonves on Donald Trump: 'It May Not Be Good for America, but It's Damn Good for CBS.'" *The Hollywood Reporter*. Accessed March 3, 2016. http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/leslie-moonves-donald-trump-may-871464.

style, page or broadcast layout)? The term is of course fake *news*, not fake novels or fake love letters. News, the *Oxford English Dictionary* explains, derives from the Latin *nova*, "new things." By 1400 one could hear its current use as "The report or account of recent (esp. important or interesting) events or occurrences, brought or coming to one as new information; new occurrences as a subject of report or talk; tidings." In the early 18th century "the news" referred to this previous definition in the form of newspapers, and by the 1920s it referred also to radio broadcasts (and several decades later to TV). In this sense, "fake news" is usually the presentation of new events or occurrences, and often the event is a discovery of something hitherto compromisingly hidden (Macron's campaign ties to the Saudis; Obama's fake birth certificate). In an era of "journalisme citoyen," the style or form in which such "fake news" is presented may be rather basic, as basic as this sentence. Or it may appear in the style of news organizations with high production values, say *The New York Times, Le Monde, CNN*. Since the basic form of it as false statement presented as a new event worthy of public attention passes from amateur forms and spaces to traditional professional journalism's or vice-versa, it may not make much sense to insist that it is only the glossier version that counts. That said, the fact that fake news sometimes mimics the style of professional journalism is important for understanding how it produces its credibility for some audiences, which sometimes goes all the way to the web address (URL), often designed to look like a similar news site: ABCnews.com.co, TheNewYorkEvening.com, or worldnewsreport.com. [10]

Nor is it just hapless news consumers who become fake news' prey. At times, journalism has produced fake news that swayed the evolution of "real" events. Perhaps the most notorious is newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst's exchange with his correspondent in Cuba on the eve of the Spanish-American War. The correspondent said, "Everything is quiet. There is no trouble here. There will be no war." Hearst responded, "You supply the pictures, I'll supply the war." Hearst, in a practice true to the "yellow journalism" era, also had his correspondents "'make up' stories about Spanish soldiers committing atrocities in Cuba and about Americans in peril there." [11]

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10.   Craig R. McClain, "Practices and Promises of Facebook for Science Outreach: Becoming a 'Nerd of Trust,'" *PLOS Biology* 15, no. 6 (June 27, 2017): e2002020, doi:10.1371/journal.pbio.2002020.

11.   Judith L Sylvester and Suzanne Huffman, *Reporting from the Front: The Media and the Military* (Lanham (Md.): Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), p. 4.

Professional journalism itself has been the victim of and accomplice to numerous strategic fake news items. In the past, it was primarily governments that manipulated the news media to print government-produced "fake news," some of the most egregious being that which justified wars: the sinking of the *Lusitania* and the Gulf of Tonkin incident are perhaps the most famous in the distant past. However, today, professional journalism's recirculation of government or corporate hoaxes or lies is nearly routine.

However, now it is clear that fellow citizens, perhaps boosted by more powerful political actors who see an opportunity to exploit them, can mislead millions of concitoyens and even some mainstream journalists. *Times* have changed. One of the most famous examples is from the culture jamming (detournement) activists The Yes Men, a member of whom posed as the spokesperson for Dow Chemical on the BBC, making an apology and a promise to pay a settlement to the victims of the Bhopal Dow Chemical disaster. [12] More routinely, organizations like the *New York Times* are forced to issue retractions and corrections after posting stories deriving from hoax Tweets, such as one from North Korea's government news agency: "Because of an editing error, an earlier version of this article attributed incorrectly a Twitter statement to the North Korean government," The *Times* said. "The North Korean government did not belittle a joint American-South Korean military exercise as "demonstrating near total ignorance of ballistic science," that statement was from the DPRK News Service, a parody Twitter account." [13] Here is one more example that strikes at the core of professional journalism, also from the *New York Times*. In late July 2012, lead technology columnist Nick Bilton re-tweeted a hoax *New York Times* column from colleague Bill Keller defending Wikileaks. [14] It was actually Wikileaks' supporters who had crafted the realistic-looking column that likely fooled millions, including other journalists. Similarly, in France, who can forget the hoax RER aggression in summer 2004, whereby a "jeune femme de 23 ans qui

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12. Alan Cowell, "BBC Falls Prey to Hoax on Anniversary of Bhopal Disaster," *The New York Times*, December 4, 2004, sec. Europe, https://www.nytimes.com/2004/12/04/world/europe/bbc-falls-prey-to-hoax-on-anniversary-of-bhopal-disaster.html.

13. Matt Novak, "New York Times Falls For That Fake North Korea Twitter Account," *Gizmodo*, accessed September 29, 2017, https://gizmodo.com/new-york-times-falls-for-that-fake-north-korea-twitter-1796634858.

14. Craig Silverman, "Fake Bill Keller Column Represents Emerging Form of Social Hoax," *Poynter*, July 30, 2012, https://www.poynter.org/news/fake-bill-keller-column-represents-emerging-form-social-hoax.

avait déclaré s'être fait aggressé" dans le RER D. According to AFP, the aggressors "agressent une femme et lui dessinent des croix gammées sur le ventre." According to "sources policières" : "Les six agresseurs, d'origine maghrébine et armés de couteaux, ont coupé les cheveux de la jeune femme, avant de dessiner au feutre noir trois croix gammées sur son ventre.". Within 24 hours much of France seemed stoked to outrage by the event, resulting in a public denunciation by president Chirac.[15] There was one problem with this whirlwind outcry: it was fake news.

INTERMEZZO: CONSUMER KNOWS BEST

At this point we can return to the issue of what fake news is and where and why people are encountering it. Instead of directly going to nor-mative definitions of news and fake news to distinguish them, perhaps it makes sense to see what news consumers themselves say is "news."

While it is reasonable to assume that when someone says, "it *seemed* like real news," they mean the content appeared similar to their generic expectations of traditional professional journalism content. However, what people call "news" is changing. According to the Reuters inter-national study of digital news habits (2016 data), approximately 70% of Americans get news (how much?) online (and over half of them get some from social media, much higher for millennials, according to the Pew studies); by comparison, approximately 40% of French use social media to get news.[16] The most popular American social media platform is Facebook.

But an interesting issue in the methodologies of some of these news consumption studies is that they do not define "news." They "beg the question" of what it is, which may result in varying implicit definitions and skewed results. One study that comes closer to defining it is the U.S.-based Pew Research Center, which in 2017 asked respondents if they got news "often" or "sometimes" online. Then, importantly, they "drilled down" to the sources online and found that 75% got that news from "news organizations," while others received it from family and

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15. Solenn de Royer, "La fausse agression du RER D," *La Croix*, July 14, 2004, https://www.la-croix.com/Actualite/France/La-fausse-agression-du-RER-D-_NG_-2004-07-14-588908.
16. Nic Newman et al., "Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2017," 2017, https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Digital%20News%20Report%202017%20web_0.pdf.

friends. They do not define "news organization," but one could imagine it includes, for some, a wide range from CNN to Breitbart, Daily Kos, as well as what are routinely listed as either fake news sites or frequent purveyors of normatively defined fake news, such as Trump Force One, One Nation Under God, Hillary Clinton Revolution (in France this might mean anything from TF1 and Le Monde, to Frdesouche and Salon Belge). [17] We need better specific data about what news is for people, not just where they got "it." That precision will also help us better understand the dynamics of fake news.

Given all of these competing and overlapping examples and definitions of "fake news," it may make more sense to think of it as a genre of disinformation, similar to propaganda associated traditionally with the state/government. It is part of a larger cultural and historical shift popularly recognized as "post-truth" and contains all sorts of aggressive options in its repertoire (some would prefer to speak of its "arms" in an "arsenal" of "information warfare"), including various communication "bombs" (rumor bombs, google bombs, twitter bombs). Despite a tight conceptual elusiveness, fake news can be usefully followed as a portal into important discussions about the epistemic and fiduciary challenges to contemporary politics (and social life generally).

For the purposes of my current discussion, I consider fake news stories those whose main claim(s) are demonstrably false or unprovable. For example, a story could be about Donald Trump's dishonesty/serial inaccuracies (facts), but focusing on a claim he never made (fake news). This would include highly polished articles or broadcasts, in terms of style and presentation that imitates the formal aspects of traditional journalism. It would also include what look like more amateurish, "journalisme citoyen" claims such as those with photoshopped fake birth certificates (Obama) or fake documents pertaining to Emanuel Macron's patrimoine; maps "proving" Saddam Hussein's weapons of Mass Destruction were moved to Syria; or even old-fashioned political rumors circulated widely with obvious intent to undermine credibility, sway perceptions, or clog up public discourse (as in the recent French episode: did Vincent Peillon's "ABC's of Equality" school policy really impose teaching radical gender theory, sex education, including lessons

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17. Liliana Bounegru et al., "A Field Guide to Fake News: A Collection of Recipes for Those Who Love to Cook with Digital Methods (Chapters 1-3)," *Social Science Research Notes*, 2017, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3024202.

in masturbation, on French children in school kindergarten to high school? Let's debate it). [18]

WHERE DOES FAKE NEWS ORIGINATE?

The alleged origins or causes of Fake News, like those of post-truth more generally, are commonly the news media and the internet. Perhaps less frequently, but after reports of Russian ads in Facebook, algorithms and business models are starting to gain more attention. Few, if any, theories turn an eye toward politicians or political communicators themselves. Nor do they dare imagine that the broader promotional culture of neo-liberal capitalism might bear some responsibility. Thus in the following pages, I will divide my analysis of fake news and post-truth to two main levels of causation: Techo-economic and political. Both are mediated by a heavily digital media-structured audience cognition, as I will explain later on.

Technical, Financial and Political Origins of Fake News Attention
How is it that so many people come into contact with fake news? The same way, perhaps, that some people come into contact with products and businesses that receive high ratings on any page that will rank according to reviews (e.g. Yelp, Amazon, Facebook).

   This is the important algorithmic relationship between bots and fake news. Fake news is not likely to get attention without creating a (fake) wave of popularity, trending. Then, it can, say, enter into the Facebook updates feed for popular posts in your network. Of course, you need someone in your network to have engaged with it. Recently, *Bustle* reported on vending machines in Moscow shopping centers, where for $0.89 one may buy 100 fake likes for a social media post, and for $1.77, one may buy 100 new followers. [19] That is only the beginning. One can by thousands of bot-followers on Twitter and Facebook for the price

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18.   Jayson Harsin, "Connecting and (Im-)Mobilizing in Regimes of Post-Truth: Strategic and Tactical Communication of the French 'Boycott School Day' Campaign," in *Global Cultures of Contestation*, ed. Esther Peeren et al. (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave, in press).

19.   Madeleine Aggeler, "You Can Buy Instagram Likes From A Vending Machine," *Bustle*, accessed September 27, 2017, https://www.bustle.com/p/you-can-buy-instagram-likes-from-a-vending-machine-now-because-nothing-is-sacred-anymore-63121.

of a coffee, not to mention the Chinese- and Russian-financed "click farms" that have been discovered in placed like Thailand. [20]

Perhaps better known to many is the case of the Macedonian teenagers who apparently worked for the Russian government, circulating fake news about candidates in the 2016 American presidential election. This example demonstrates the way political strategies exploit economic actors. According to the BBC: many of the pro-Trump/Anti-Clinton fake news stories, "were coming from a small town in Macedonia where young people were using it as a get-rich scheme, paying Facebook to promote their posts and reaping the rewards of the huge number visits to their websites." [21] Of this politically exploitable fake news business model, Craig Silverman of *Buzzfeed* reports that the major search engines, ad networks (like Google ads) and social media platforms have helped fake news gain attention and circulate, as go-betweens that connect companies ads to fake news stories, financing the latter: "More than 60 websites publishing fake news are earning revenue from advertising networks and most of them are working with major networks such as Revcontent, Google AdSense, and Content.ad, according to a review by BuzzFeed News." A second study with researchers at *The Field Guide to Fake News* "found several cases where fake news sites that were kicked out of one network simply moved to another in order to continue earning money." They conclude that "the digital ad industry" is economically supportive of "fake news and fraud in its ecosystem." [22] Is it likely, one might ask, that these powerful media businesses, such as Google, Facebook, Twitter (the media through which our information, disinformation, and political argument increasingly flows), will regulate/ police themselves regarding fake news? Just as there are economic agents that produce fake news with political effects, there are political agents that produce fake news with political and economic effects.

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20. Nick Bilton, "Friends, and Influence, for Sale Online," *Bits Blog*, 1398006016, https://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/04/20/friends-and-influence-for-sale-online/.

21. Richard Gray, "Lies, Propaganda and Fake News: A Challenge for Our Age," March 1, 2017, http://www.bbc.com/future/story/20170301-lies-propaganda-and-fake-news-a-grand-challenge-of-our-age.

22. Craig Silverman Vo Jeremy Singer-Vine, Lam Thuy, "Fake News, Real Ads: Fake News Publishers Are Still Earning Money From Big Ad Networks," *BuzzFeed*, April 4, 2017, https://www.buzzfeed.com/craigsilverman/fake-news-real-ads.

Demokadic Politics and Fake News

There are clear political motivations for producing and/or strategically exploiting fake news, just as there are clear reasons why people are susceptible to them. Analyses of fake news causes typically pay inadequate attention to practices of increasingly communication-driven anti-democratic, (or, more suitably, *demokadic*, from the Greek demos/people and kados/hate) [23] politics.

As I've noted in my research since 2005, professional political communication has increasingly and systematically attempted to manage news media and popular opinion through fake news. While historically, journalism and government have strategically peddled fake news (as invented events; or extremely misleading versions of them), and though we seldom hear about it in contemporary fake news discussions, public relations has increasingly merged with resource-rich (in money, institutional power, and social capital) political actors to shape reality toward strategic ends. Public relations' grandfather, Edward Bernays is credited with inventing the "pseudo-event," the organization of news by promoting a future event, thus attracting news attention, making it news. [24]

Bernays was a forerunner of contemporary reality creators. In 1922, he wrote, "The counsel on public relations not only knows what news value is, but knowing it, he is in a position to *make news happen*. He is a creator of events." [25] Bernays worked in the commercial and political sector, in the latter managing the reputation of presidents as well as assisting the CIA in the Guatemalan coup. Both sectors depended on convincing news media that something fake was really happening, which

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23. See Jacques Rancière, *La haine de la démocratie* (Paris: La fabrique éditions, 2005). Rancière writes, "Le double discours sur la démocratie n'est certes pas neuf." However, Rancière does not interest himself with the 20th century-long project (initially, mostly American, it appears) that objectified the people of democracy as a population to be managed by elites and technocratic allies, especially through communication projects informed by commercial marketing and public relations techniques in lock-step with discoveries in the cognitive sciences and war communication (not simply propaganda, but also the organization and management of networks, appearances, suppression of alternative information, and so forth). Today political marketing, cognitive science, and big data analytics are a formidable project that attempts to manage unruly democracy. See for example, William A. Gorton, "Manipulating Citizens: How Political Campaigns' Use of Behavioral Social Science Harms Democracy," *New Political Science* 38, no. 1 (January 2, 2016): 61–80; and Drew Westen, *The Political Brain: The Role of Emotion in Deciding the Fate of the Nation* (Public Affairs, 2007).

24. Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, New York (Knopf, 2012).

25. In Boorstin, *The Image*, p. 11.

they covered and, in effect, made happen in the eyes of readers/viewers/ citizens/consumers. Some 80 years after Bernays' statement, George W. Bush's senior advisor and legendary spin doctor Karl Rove, was publicly bragging that journalists naively belonged to a "reality-based community," while strategists like him "create our own reality," which they are free to "study." Journalists, he explained, will be left "to just study what we do." To be fair to these proud modern-to-postmodern manipulators of political reality, they are in fact part of a grand legacy of ethically suspect reality manipulation, fake-news-makers, from Plato's Gorgias, through Machiavelli and Josef Goebbels.

Fake news or rumor bombs (both strategic by nature) today often function cunningly through networks and surrogates, which free their primary beneficiaries from ethical responsibility. Of the abundance of possible examples, consider the following sample.

After the barrage of deceptive communication bridging 9/11 and the invasion of Iraq, 2004 was an election year in the U.S; and fake news and rumor bombs abounded. Infamously, the US-based Swift Boat Veterans for Truth claimed presidential candidate John Kerry "lied" to the American people about his record in Vietnam (this seeming grassroots group "consulted" a Republican-tied public relations firm). This category also includes amateur political communicators such as otherwise unremarkable Andy Martin, who [26] is credited with originating the rumor bomb that Barack Obama is a Muslim.

Many millions of people inside and outside the U.S. have heard about the popular rumor that "Obama is Muslim." Far fewer know much about its origins and circulatory lives, which is an instructive case in fake news. The rumor started amateurishly yet had some overtones of more professional stories. Martin issued a "press release" (a rhetoric of "authority"), and posted it to a popular conservative online forum, Free Republic, where it quickly generated discussion and was recirculated by right-wing information aggregators. The rumor bomb was further publicized by another amateur opinion leader/conspiracy theorist, Jerome Corsi, who hit the big-time with his best-selling book, *Obama Nation* (2008).

This rumor bomb's fake news life and political utility was only beginning. Increasing numbers of Americans were polled (did they

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26. Matthew Mosk. "An Attack That Came Out of the Ether,"*The Washington Post,* June 28, 2008. http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/06/27/ AR2008062703781_pf.html.

believe Obama was Muslim?) throughout the campaign and into Obama's tenure as president. Most interesting and troubling for some observers is that despite its origin on the fringe right, it was exploited by Obama's 2008 rival's, Hillary Clinton's, campaign. Her campaign was discovered circulating emails that Obama was Muslim. Trump's response to Clinton's accusation that he shamelessly peddled the "racist birther lie" (that Obama's birth certificate was false) was that her own campaign (for which she is held responsible, he implied) circulated the rumor bomb that he was Muslim (if not the holder of a fake birth certificate). [27] This zombie rumor bomb, is re-born in slightly shape-shifted form, again and again (for example, the fake news story in late December 2016 that Obama is really a gay radical Muslim). [28] Thus political fake news often starts as an amateurish rumor bomb (a false claim deliberately designed to undermine an opponent or idea), which develops into a larger story, mixing facts, rumors and falsehoods, gets attention of non-fringe citizens and journalists and is exploited by mainstream politicians, parties, organizations. Similar examples are available in the French political sphere. Regarding factitious information directly from the political establishment, Nicholas Sarkozy provides several, including the claim that François Hollande was supported by 700 mosquées in the 2012 election or, in his wishful 2017 comeback, the repeated claim that professors only work six months of the year. [29]

Regarding fake news issuing from rumor bombs in more amateur or anonymous fringe spaces of the web, consider the popular right-wing network rumor (reminiscent of the American "Barack Obama is a Muslim" rumor bomb) that Alain "Ali" Juppé was pro-Muslim communitarianism (code perhaps also for "weak on terrorism" in a sensitive post-Bataclan/-Charlie Hebdo political moment). Apparently, the attack started in 2006 when as Mayor of Bordeaux, Juppé supported a "centre culturel et cultuel musulman." The *intox* made tours of the increasingly

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27. Ben Smith and Byron Tau, "Birtherism: Where It All Began," *POLITICO*, April 22, 2011, http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0411/53563.html.

28. Associated Press, "AP FACT CHECK: Ex-Agent Didn't Write Book Outing Obama," *US News & World Report*, December 27, 2016, https://www.usnews.com/news/politics/articles/2016-12-27/ap-fact-check-ex-agent-didnt-write-book-outing-obama.

29. Laure Equy, "Appels de Ramadan et Des 700 Mosquées à Voter Hollande, l'intox - Libération," *Liberation*, avril 2012, http://www.liberation.fr/france/2012/04/26/l-intox-des-appels-de-tariq-ramadan-et-des-700-mosquees-a-voter-pour-hollande_814519; Agathe Ranc, "Non, M. Sarkozy, Les Profs Ne Travaillent Pas 'Six Mois Dans l'année,'" *L'Obs*, October 18, 2016, http://tempsreel.nouvelobs.com/politique/election-presidentielle-2017/20161018. OBS9958/non-m-sarkozy-les-profs-ne-travaillent-pas-six-mois-dans-l-annee.html.

large and closed (anti-mainstream media) networks of what Dominique Albertini, David Doucet call the fachosphere, supportive of Le Front National: "Les intox sont principalement relayées sur des nouveaux médias hyper-militants, consommateurs de sujets que les théoriciens de l'extrême droite nomment la 'réinformation'." It is impossible to prove what impact the disinformation had, but Juppé campaign managers are convinced it destroyed his candidacy. [30] That it played some role appears indisputable.

Similar attempts were launched against Emmanuel Macron in 2017 but were not enough to sink his campaign. There was an impressive trove of "reinformation" about Macron. He led a double life as a gay man; his campaign was financed by Saudi Arabia; or shared more than 100,000 times in social media networks, il "avait pour projet de faire payer un loyer aux propriétaires." [31] Perhaps the most widely heard piece of fake news is the "patrimoine" rumor bomb. There "des sites d'extrême-droite publient un bail commercial sur lequel apparaît le nom du président de la République," which speak of a "villa à Marrakech" and a "société à Panama." [32] Remarkably, finalist presidential candidate Marine Le Pen fanned the flames of this rumor bomb in her debate with Macron May 3 when she casually averred : "J'espère que l'on n'apprendra pas que vous avez un compte offshore au Bahamas." Here we see the synergistic circulation between the filter bubbled fake news (in networks of the extreme right) and its legitimation and exploitation by more visible politicians. Thus, these are a version of fake news I've called rumor bombs, since they are posted in social networks as a kind of "journalisme citoyen." [33]

XIV

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30. Axel Roux, "'Ali Juppé' : Comment La Fachosphère s'est Infiltrée Dans La Primaire de La Droite," *Franceinfo*, November 23, 2016, http://www.francetvinfo.fr/politique/les-republicains/primaire-de-la-droite/ali-juppe-comment-la-fachosphere-s-est-infiltre-dans-la-primaire-de-la-droite_1934839.html; Pierre Lepelletier, "Après 'Ali Juppé', La 'fachosphère' s'en Prend à 'Farid Fillon'," *Le Figaro*, December 19, 2016.

31. Licia Meysenq, "Présidentielle : Les Rumeurs Sur Emmanuel Macron Inondent La Campagne," *Franceinfo*, April 27, 2017, http://www.francetvinfo.fr/politique/emmanuel-macron/presidentielle-les-rumeurs-sur-emmanuel-macron-inondent-la-chtmlagne_2162536.html.

32. AFP, "Compte Offshore: Macron Accuse Marine Le Pen de Propager Des 'Fake News,'" *Leparisien.Fr*, May 4, 2017, http://www.leparisien.fr/flash-actualite-politique/compte-offshore-macron-accuse-marine-le-pen-de-propager-des-fake-news-04-05-2017-6916086.php.

33. Pélissier, Nicolas, and Serge Chaudy. "Le journalisme participatif et citoyen sur Internet: un populisme dans l'air du temps?." *Quaderni. Communication, technologies, pouvoir* 70 (2009): 89-102.

Fake News Victims: True Believers, Fast Thinkers, and Democracy

While there is evidence that non-partisan/independent citizens and the left are victims of fake news and rumor bombs, several recent studies demonstrate that it is especially a right-leaning phenomenon. This is not because right or left seem more cognitively inclined to fall victim to it (on the contrary, experimental research sees little difference). Rather, the Right appears more often, though not exclusively, at the origin of fake news. Several studies are emerging on the U.S. situation, which find that while there are "filter bubble" sites that contain mine fields of fake news for the left, the phenomenon leans right-ward. This is perhaps the case for two major reasons, neither of which have anything directly to do with *niveau d'education* of fake news' victims.

First, in the U.S. case, recent studies show that citizens who identify as liberals, Democrats, or independents consume a variety of news sources in the "news ecology." They are more trusting of the journalism institution than are their political opposites. Conservatives and Republicans overwhelmingly consume a small number of right-leaning news, and do not venture beyond. They are extremely distrustful of the journalism institution. Furthermore, they surround themselves in everyday life and online with people who share their political views (which is not the case, as much, for their opposites:[34] Or as a Buzzfeed study explained, right-wing posts frequently linked only to similar "partisan sources, which in turn often did the same."[35]

The transnational Right is not just distrustful of the journalism institution; it aggressively rejects and attacks it, leaving it vulnerable to those who exploit the closed information and influence network. From Hungary and Poland to France and the UK, right-wing populism is

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34. Approximately half of conservatives and Republicans get news exclusively from Fox news. Some others venture into overlapping networks such as Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity. Conservatives, the report says, "Express greater distrust than trust of 24 of the 36 news sources measured in the survey. At the same time, fully 88% of consistent conservatives trust Fox News." Furthermore, on Facebook, more than other groups, they hear echoes of their own views; as in everyday life, where they say their friends share their political views (66%). See Amy Mitchell et al., "Political Polarization & Media Habits," *Pew Research Center's Journalism Project*, October 21, 2014, http://www.journalism.org/2014/10/21/political-polarization-media-habits/.

35. Craig Silverman Singer-Vine Lauren Strapagiel, Hamza Shaban, Ellie Hall, Jeremy, "Hyperpartisan Facebook Pages Are Publishing False And Misleading Information At An Alarming Rate," *BuzzFeed*, October 20, 2016, https://www.buzzfeed.com/craigsilverman/partisan-fb-pages-analysis.

palpably anti-media and often also anti-"expert"/-science/-intellectuals. Both Donald Trump and the German-based Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the West refer to "the lying media" Trump and France's Le Front National also call unflattering news "fake news." [36]

Recent studies of fake news and partisanship during the U.S. election show a strong right-wing fake news bias, in production and consumption (though left-wing havens are also replete with it). In France, initial studies on fake news during les presidentielles appear similar. Social media analysis firm Bakamo reports that 1/4 shared social media links about the French presidential elections were from sites that promoted fake news. Out of 8 million links analyzed, Bakamo concluded: "Une exposition accrue aux sites qui répandent des mensonges, des théories conspirationnistes, de la propagande pro-russe et des opinions racistes pourrait jouer un rôle crucial et finalement décisif" [37] The Right is not inherently more likely to be victim of fake news; but at the moment, they are more likely to be victim because they appear to be more targeted by those who strategically wish to exploit them.

Conclusion

In the discussion above, I began to sort through various versions of "fake news," first to try and answer what it might be-normatively, empirically, historically. I then began to explore what its possible causes were. I will end by briefly considering fake news effects on and stakes for contemporary democracy.

The first category of significant public effects regards basic perception and attention, precious resources today. Successful fake news captures attention, and sets agendas and primes citizen audiences (powerfully suggests that candidates, issues, events be viewed in this or that particular

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36. See Sebastian Stier et al., "When Populists Become Popular: Comparing Facebook Use by the Right-Wing Movement Pegida and German Political Parties," *Information, Communication & Society* 20, no. 9 (September 2, 2017): 1365–88; Vincent Coquaz, "'Fake News' : La Nouvelle 'arme' Anti-Média Du FN - Œil Sur Le Front," Fevrier 2017, https://oeilsurlefront.liberation.fr/les-idees/2017/02/20/fake-news-la-nouvelle-arme-anti-media-du-fn_1549732; and Paul Laubacher, "Quand Front National et Fachosphère s'essaient Au 'Fake News' - 21 Février 2017 - L'Obs," Fevrier 2017, http://tempsreel.nouvelobs.com/presidentielle-2017/20170220.OBS5529/quand-front-national-et-fachosphere-s-essaient-au-fake-news.html.

37. "Cinq 'Fake News' Qui Ont Marqué La Campagne Présidentielle," *Europe 1*, avril 2017, http://www.europe1.fr/politique/cinq-fake-news-qui-ont-marque-la-campagne-presidentielle-3305312.

light). A recent study "indicated that Facebook engagement (likes, comments, shares) was actually greater for the top 20 fake news stories than the top 20 real news stories in the three months leading up to the [American] election."[38]

Another theoretical blind spot of fake news theorization is the surrounding convergence media culture (not simply the reductive claim that it's the internet—what about the internet exactly is a problem?). While it's a la mode to explain fake news via audience "cognitive bias," what's less explored in the cognitive scientific literature is information processing in the habitual flow or new media temporality—the relationship of the communication infrastructure to habits, attention, emotion, and epistemology.[39] As I have argued elsewhere, cyber-citizens (increasingly most of us) are constantly hailed by information-givers and influence-seekers, which seek to commodify or politically exploit us (or both, and sometimes they're our friends). This surrounding temporality for fake news cognition is accelerated, which cognitive scientists argue is not conducive to deliberative processes of information and argument assessment.[40] This anti-reflective state is characterized by the temporal flow of communication (including fake news) is fast and subjects are constantly shifting, usually between tasks and content (what media scholars call "simultaneous media use" and "three screens," "always on").[41] Recent experimental cognitive scientific research of fake news has found that while exposure to fake news headlines makes one likely to believe what they saw, analytic thinking is a buffer against it. Unsurprisingly, analytic thinking is not reactive; it demands a slower

XVII

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38.   Craig Silverman Singer-Vine Lauren Strapagiel, Hamza Shaban, Ellie Hall, Jeremy, "Hyperpartisan Facebook Pages Are Publishing False And Misleading Information At An Alarming Rate," *BuzzFeed*, accessed September 30, 2017, https://www.buzzfeed.com/craigsilverman/partisan-fb-pages-analysis.

39.   Joe Pierre, "Psychology, Gullibility, and the Business of Fake News," *Psychology Today*, July 1, 2017, https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/psych-unseen/201707/psychology-gullibility-and-the-business-fake-news.

40.   See Jayson Harsin, "Public argument in the new media ecology: Implications of temporality, spatiality, and cognition," *JAIC Journal of Argumentation in Context* 3, no. 1 (2014): 7–34.

41.   See Dan Hassoun, "Tracing Attentions: Toward an Analysis of Simultaneous Media Use," *Television & New Media*, December 12, 2012; Naomi Baron, *Always On:Language in an Online and Mobile World* (Oxford University Press, 2008) ; Alison Hearn, "`Meat, Mask, Burden` Probing the Contours of the Branded `self`," *Journal of Consumer Culture* 8, no. 2 (July 1, 2008): 197–217; and chapter 7, "Do Not Sell Your Friends," in Douglas Rushkoff and Leland Purvis, *Program or Be Programmed: Ten Commands for a Digital Age* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2011).

temporality.[42] If many, right and left of the political dial, are disposed to reacting quickly and emotionally to content, fake news is not likely to take its exit soon. Online habits are tied to consumer capitalist goals and have a strategic, anti-analytic temporality to them. The management of the stage (and performance time limit) on which fake news performs is a formidable contemporary power, as theorists have already noted.[43]

The second major area of effects is epistemic and affective/emotional. Fake news produces false belief and confusion, and tied to the first point, it creates a temporality of verification that is laborious, which may further produce political frustration or cynicism—a feeling of political vertigo.

In epic levels of social and institutional distrust,[44] many solutions where authorities (fact-checking) flag fake news are unlikely to succeed, even if they may make small inroads. People don't trust fact-checkers, and the fact-checking depends on people seeing them, repeatedly. If they don't trust them, they will not likely see them. Artificial Intelligence solutions might help most if they can be trained to weed out fake news as soon as it is posted (or in the posting process); however, there is likely to be backlash against "biased" programmers—making it a free speech issue. Meanwhile, at our fake news detriment, we neglect the issue of political actors who have increasingly blurred lines between military propaganda attempts to create and suppress realities, in *demokadic* fashion. In a more democratic world, wouldn't we all like to help create reality?

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42. Gordon Pennycook and David G. Rand, "Who Falls for Fake News? The Roles of Analytic Thinking, Motivated Reasoning, Political Ideology, and Bullshit Receptivity," September 12, 2017, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3023545.

43. Bernard Stiegler, *Prendre soin: De la jeunesse et des générations* (Paris: Flammarion, 2008); Jayson Harsin, "Regimes of Posttruth, Postpolitics, and Attention Economies," *Communication, Culture & Critique* 8, no. 2 (February 24, 2015): 327–33.

44. L. Street et al., "Sharp Partisan Divisions in Views of National Institutions," Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, July 10, 2017, http://www.people-press.org/2017/07/10/sharp-partisan-divisions-in-views-of-national-institutions/; Jean-Pierre VERAN, "Education : La Question de Confiance Ou l'école Au Défi de La Confiance ?," Club de Mediapart, accessed July 24, 2017, https://blogs.mediapart.fr/jean-pierre-veran/blog/151016/education-la-question-de-confiance-ou-l-ecole-au-defi-de-la-confiance; Carine Marcé, "Kantar - Baromètre 2017 de La Confiance Des Français Dans Les Media," Kantar, February 2, 2017, http://fr.kantar.com/médias/digital/2017/barometre-2017-de-la-confiance-des-francais-dans-les-media/.

ABSTRACT

This article is a critical (not merely descriptive) guide to fake news. It tracks the term's history, first in American comedy shows, and shifting more recently into a feature of "post-truth" politics, where it is manufactured (un-humoursly) as a weapon of strategic deception (even geo-political). Fake news phenomena have considerably dangerous implications for contemporary democracy.

XIX