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THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF FAKE NEWS

"Fake News" and Political Economy

Fake news should be a serious topic in the political economy of communication because it brings into sharp relief a critique of the news industry and of journalism from a critical theory perspective. As noted in chapter two, political economy approaches have the advantage of a focus on unequal power relations in the field of communication, including news and journalism (Mansell 2004). Given there is a growing interest in political economy within communication studies (Fuchs and Mosco 2012), it is timely to focus attention on the apparent epidemic of fake news to explain and historicize it. As it continues to evolve through the media ecosphere, fake news appears to be a period-specific construct that has application only within the context of the 2016 US Presidential election and the subsequent chaotic freak show that the Trump presidency has become. President Donald Trump has weaponized the term—with echoes of the Nazi slogan, "*Lügenpresse*" the "lying press"—to attack media outlets that he doesn't like (Noak 2016). More broadly, the fake news issue is a debate about who gets to define "truth," and associated with that, it throws into relief the role of journalists and journalism in liberal democracies (McNair 2018).

There is no doubt that fake news is at the heart of a profoundly political debate, centered in the United States, but with echoes across Europe following the "Brexit" negotiations and the French election of 2017. A study from the Internet Institute at Oxford University in April 2017 reportedly found that perhaps a quarter of political news circulating on social media in France was from suspect sources and could be designated as fake or "junk news" (Howard et al. 2017). News reports at the time were quick to also blame Russian state-sanctioned propaganda actions as being behind many of the false anti–Macron and

pro-Fillon stories, alleging they were being promoted by the Sputnik and Russia Today news services (Gilbert 2017). The moral panic about Russian interference in western nations also surrounded the fraught "Brexit" debate in the UK. Throughout 2017 allegations were raised in the media about so-called Russian propaganda being circulated to cloud the "Brexit" debate and to favor a "leave" position (Grice 2017). In another parallel with the post-election inquiries into "fake news" in the United States, Facebook came under fire for not doing "enough"—whatever that might mean—to curtail the influence of algorithmically promoted false stories during the Brexit referendum (Week 2017).

While it is tempting to take allegations of Russian interference in Western politics at face value, it is important to step back and ask why Putin and Russia would be the culprits and the target of such claims. To some degree, it can be argued that it is Western media and political operatives falling back onto an old Cold War trope reminiscent of the 1950s, or the Cuban missile crisis of 1962. While alleged Russian meddling and propaganda efforts are the subject of inquiries in the US, France and Britain—and perhaps with good reason—it is simplistic and reactionary to buy into the conspiracy theory as the full, or the only, explanation of what is happening in this contested arena. We should be particularly cautious when one of the political figures promoting the line that Russia created the "fake news" problem is former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair, one of the architects of the fake 2003 dossier that launched cruise missiles against the civilian population of Baghdad. As Glenn Greenwald (2017a) has pointed out in *The Intercept*, there is also plenty of "fake news" around that overstates possible Russian interference in the US presidential election. By the time you're reading this, the Russian interference story may have reached its conclusion, but as of August 2018 it seems to have some way to go, with more revelations to play out before it is over.

A political economy inquiry into fake news can begin with an analysis of contemporary American, British and French events—particularly as they have global significance and impact—but it cannot end there. To the extent it can, our approach must distance itself from current hyperbolic accounts of contemporaneous events to examine the category of fake news dispassionately, historically and through a lens of materialist political economy. In particular, our focus in this chapter needs to be on the structural and procedural relationships of power that are articulated in the digital media landscape, which include questions of production, the allocation of resources and the controlling role of capital in the media and not just on the "symbolic content" of the messages (Mansell 2004: 77).

Categories of Fake News

The unprecedented chaos surrounding Donald Trump's presidency is the immediate context for a discussion of the political economy of fake news, but it should not distract us from a more serious, scholarly and forensic examination

of what the category of fake news means within the scholarship of journalism and communication studies. The issue of fake news goes much further than the simple politico-cultural binary frame through which the Trump presidency is being viewed and it also has extensive historical precedents, even though the term itself may not have been in common usage prior to the 2016 US campaign season.

The renewed interest in fake news as a category has led to several attempts to arrive at a workable definition. Some, attempt a broad approach, while others, like this one by researchers at Trend Micro, are quite limited:

> Fake news is the promotion and propagation of news articles via social media . . . in such a way that they appear to be spread by other users, as opposed to being paid-for advertising . . . [and] designed to influence or manipulate users' opinions on a certain topic towards certain objectives.
>
> *(Gu, Kropotov and Yarochkin 2017)*

This narrow definition is operationalized in the Trend Micro report from which it is taken because it suits the analysis and evidence presented. In short, the report argues that fake news is the commercial weaponization of information, largely by elements operating in the shadows of the Dark Net, most likely with the backing of one or more States, notably Russia and China.

While this is useful and relevant to the potential use of fake news in the 2016 US election, it is a narrow and ahistorical definition, which is unsuited to a wider discussion of fake news. It does not, for example, account for fake news that is not disseminated through social media; nor does it account for well-established forms of false information such as public relations astroturfing. Fake news—as a generic name for false or misleading news-like information—can be spread by word of mouth, or through traditional print and broadcast channels and it has been distributed via those means for hundreds, if not thousands of years (Burkhardt 2017: 5). Therefore, we need either a much broader definition of fake news, or we need several specific definitions that are suitable for deployment in different arenas.

In simple terms, fake news can be broken down into the following sub-categories:

- Fake news used as a synonym for "false stories," that is stories that are "intentionally fabricated," but can be proven as factually incorrect and that "could mislead readers" (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017: 213).
- Fake news as stories that originate on satirical websites, such as *The Onion*, "but could be misunderstood as factual when viewed in isolation," parti-cularly through a social media lens (ibid.: 213).
- News-like content that is advertorial and commercial that is selling a service or product, also known as "native advertising."

- The term "fake news" used in political discourse as an accusation against information being promoted by your opponents. Fake news is deployed as pejorative term for any item of news that you disagree with, or that paints your cause, position, candidate, leader, or president in an unfavorable light.
- Fake news as a form of propaganda. In this context, deliberately faked information is deployed via a news-like interface in order to deceive readers or viewers for political or commercial advantage, also known as "gaslighting"—the use of emotional undermining, and other manipulative techniques to hold power over someone, or a group of people (Sarkis 2017).
- Fake news that is highly ideological and misleading, but which appears to have some basis in verifiable objective reality and therefore contributes to the manufacture of consent within subaltern groups.

Political economy helps to explain and contextualize each of these distinct categories, which are all derived from the dialectic of contradictions within journalism as practiced in liberal democratic polities founded on the capitalist mode of production. As argued here, there is an inevitability about fake news, given that a wholly truthful media is almost categorically impossible in capitalist societies.

Fake News through a Historical Lens

Fake news existed long before Donald Trump claimed to have invented the term in 2017. Hoaxes have also been an integral part of the news landscape for the last 500 years, and while reporters might have insisted they were based on truth, often they were far from it. So, an important question that political economy can provide an answer to is: Where has the current tsunami of fake news come from? A simple answer is that there is a level of deception involved in the news process and it's always been there. Sometimes it is conscious and at others represents a largely unconscious, but systemic bias. One researcher has likened the news "ballads" of the sixteenth century to the tabloid press of today; using sensationalism and outrage to sell, and not being too particular about the truth. "Like the tabloid news coverage of today, news ballads were always sensationalist, covering topics that were sure to appeal to the attention of shoppers in busy marketplaces" (McIlvenna 2017).

One of my favorite examples is an early-seventeenth-century news report of dragons in southern England. No doubt the idea of dragons would be terrifying to people in the region, and they were unlikely to venture out to see for themselves. In more recent time, hoaxes have taken in everything from supposed landings on the moon in 1835 to Orson Welles's radio broadcast of H. G. Wells's novel *War of the Worlds* a century later in 1938. These are amusing hoaxes, designed to entertain rather than convince. Satirical news programs also relied on an element of fakery, such as the famous BBC prank story about Italian spaghetti trees on April Fool's Day in 1957. Such hoaxes play

on a certain ignorance or naivety in the audience, but they are not malicious. However, there are clear examples, both contemporary and historical, where false news stories have been used to great effect. One incident, which some suggest is merely apocryphal, concerns the media baron William Randolph Hearst during the US–Mexico war. According to some accounts Hearst demanded that his correspondent and war artist Frederic Remington stay in Havana even though he felt that there would be no conflict: "You furnish the pictures, I'll furnish the war," Hearst is supposed to have cabled in January 1898. While the telegram story is now considered a hoax, there is no doubt that Hearst used an incident involving a mysterious explosion aboard a US navy vessel in Havana harbor to create a pretext for war. Hearst's newspapers blamed a Spanish bomb planted on the USS *Maine*, but there has never been any evidence to counter the accepted view that it was an unfortunate accident in the ship's ammunition lockers that caused the explosion (Campbell 2011). This incident has been called the "WMD episode" of its time. History provides many such examples which are worth recounting because they help to put contemporary concerns about the fake news phenomenon into useful context.

The current crisis of trust in traditional news sources can probably be traced back to the Iraq invasion of 2003 and the way news outlets uncritically reported the WMD lie as pretext for war (Hirst 2011). Since then the crisis has only deepened, in 2017, only a little over half of American voters said they trust mainstream media (Barthel and Mitchell 2017); a Reuters Foundation study reported that about one-third of respondents across 36 countries felt they could trust the news media (Goldsmith 2017). Ironically, both surveys found that trust levels for social media are even lower, hovering in the mid-20s. The crisis in media profitability and the failure of the audience-commodity advertising model to cover rising production costs is the second structural component of the rise in fake news. There has been a steady rise in the amount of non-news content being shoehorned into a news-like template and format and splashed across the websites of major news organizations. The polite term for such content is "native advertising," it is sales copy written to resemble news content, but usually with a brand-specific message. This type of content is popular among key advertisers and it is a growing market; some analysts say the amount of native advertising online has tripled since 2015 (Main 2017).

Fake News and Commodity Journalism

The News Establishment creates its own versions of "fake news" for a variety of reasons; some are purely commercial—for the profitable clicks, views, likes and shares it generates—and others are highly political—for deliberate and systemic propaganda effect. Both involve the deliberate deception of the news-consuming public, and this is what unites them. In his book, *Post-Truth: How Bullshit Conquered the World*, James Ball (2017) makes an important point about the

wider problematic category of fake news; there's a "whole range" of stories that are, for one reason or another, false but are believed by people who either accept that they might be true, or "convincingly pretend" to believe them. This last point is important in relation to Donald Trump; his predilection for both shaming the news media as fake and generating his own tsunami of fake news is buttressed by his convincing act of self-belief in his own rhetoric. "Trump's versatility in generating half-truth, untruth and outright spectacular mendacity borders on genius" (ibid.).

Ball invokes a non-academic term to describe the easily spoken untruths now routinely part of political discourse; he calls it "bullshit" (adopted from a 2005 book, *On Bullshit*, by Harry Frankfurt). The media's spreading of this "bullshit" is the outcome of a state of affairs in which politicians no longer care about telling the truth, but only about the "optics"—how a given situation will play out in the media and the "narrative" that is constructed around it. "Bullshit" is a useful phrase because it encompasses more than deliberately concocted false stories; it also applies to the half-true statement that is passed off to journalists who are too lazy, too poorly resourced, or too ill-equipped intellectually to challenge it. The "culture and norms" (Ball 2017) of the newsroom are not sufficiently robust to filter out the bullshit and so it enters public life as a first-draft of history and becomes normalized through unchallenged repetition. It is also useful to be reminded that before President Trump, the term "fake news" had other meanings, including as a label for a category of broadcast news that made use of public relations material known as a "video news release": "A VNR presents a client's message, using a format and tone that mimic actual TV news. Nothing in the material for broadcast identifies the PR firm—or, more importantly, the paying client or clients— behind the VNR" (Farsetta and Price 2006: 5).

From a progressive political economy perspective, the symbolic content of "fake news," such as represented in VNRs, or even by Trump supporters, has a long and political history that is intimately and dialectically bound to the commodity form of journalism in a capitalist market economy. A Fourth Estate-inflected approach would attempt to explain fake news using a normative, yet highly ideological, media markets model in which fake news is theorized as "distorted signals uncorrelated with the truth" about the state of the world that arises in the market because it is "cheaper to provide than precise signals," and "may generate some utility for some consumers" (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017: 212). This explanation does not examine the power and control issues that actually shape the market and it leaves the focus on the symbolic, rather than address structural and procedural issues which make the production and distribution of fake news an attractive proposition to some actors.

In the eyes of his supporters at least, Trump has successfully appropriated a term that was first applied to news stories mostly supportive of his campaign, that were spread widely on social media that proved to be fake (Coll 2017). The obvious false story about the Pope endorsing Trump is the paradigm example.

The fake Pope endorsement story began life on a now defunct satirical news website; and spread virally, highlighting the symbolic and memetic process of people believing what they would like to be true, and circulating it within sympathetic echo chambers of like-minded social media friends. However, a more puzzling and complicated picture emerged when a so-called fake news epicenter was discovered in the isolated Macedonian town of Veles where approximately 100 pro-Trump sites were registered and operated. It is hard to think of this as a coincidence, but it certainly highlights the valuable nexus between fake news and the profit motive. According to a report in *Wired*, some of the teens behind the fake news sites were making US$8,000 per month, more than 20 times the average wage in Veles at the time (Subramarnian 2017). The article does not explore the possibility that there was Russian influence behind the entrepreneurial teens, but other examples of alleged Russian promotion of dubious news during the American election have been reported. The most serious is that Russian agents bought US$100,000 or more in advertising on Facebook with the clear aim of promoting false election stories and targeted at voters in crucial swing states. These stories were then amplified by a coordinated wave of reposting and tweeting by fake "bot" accounts, according to news reports (Shane 2017).

Ball (2017) makes some very good points about how the economics of the news industry encourage the production of fake news, not just deliberate fakes, but clickbait headlines and ideologically charged front page stories designed to provoke audiences into emotional responses to situations where facts are ignored, manipulated, or misrepresented to create the desired effect. A March 2017 report from the Tow Center for Digital Journalism makes a similar point about the profitability of fake news. According to the authors, "the structure and economics of social platforms incentivize the spread of low-quality content over high-quality material" (Bell and Owen 2017: 10). This observation underscores the importance of the commercial motive behind journalism—the very profit motive of capitalism—it is to make money from the sale of the news commodity, and to do this via the redistribution of surplus value from labor to capital. This transaction occurs through the vehicle of advertising, which transfers surplus value from the advertiser to the publisher via the commodification of audiences. Thus, we cannot separate the social, cultural, political and ideological functions of news from the simple function of capital accumulation. This principle is still the driving force behind the news business in the digital realm, even though the business models that underpin it are broken, perhaps irrevocably. As Bell and Owen (ibid.: 11) acknowledge, the spread of "fake news" online is a symptom of "the commercialization and private control of the public sphere."

To understand this requires a return to one of political economy's central concerns, the transfer of value (as profit) from advertisers to media companies via a process known as audience commodification. A simple explanation of this

concept is that media audiences (whether, for print, broadcast or online products) are aggregated by the publisher and then sold to advertisers; the price depends on the size and quality of this audience commodity. The act of viewing the content becomes a form of "work," or commodified labor performed without any monetary compensation and therefore "free" to the publisher/seller (Smythe 2006). As Fuchs (2012) and others have demonstrated, the audience as commodity is still a key category in the political economy of communication. However, in the digital mediasphere this commodification takes two forms, both of which are crucial to the discussion of "fake news": the first is the simple aggregation of eyeballs that involves the audience in the active "work" of viewing content; the second is the category of audience labor that actually creates content which is then appropriated by media capital without payment.

Both types of labor are essential to the circulation, commodification and valorization of fake news via digital channels and platforms. There are several reasons for this, and most are predicated on the low barriers to entry that allow individuals and organizations to establish and monetize web content for a small capital investment. Secondly, the ease with which algorithmic "bots" can be established to mimic human social media accounts creates a low-cost and effective means to disseminate information virally, whether it is reliable, or not. To a substantial degree, news publishers are now "at the mercy of the algorithm" (Bell and Owen 2017: 10). Finally, once bots have initiated a release of information it is easily amplified through friend networks, often without it being easily detectable that it originated with bot accounts (Burkhardt 2017: 15). As the fake news drama has unfolded throughout 2017, the algorithms employed by Facebook and Google—which appear to be open to manipulation by well-programmed "bot" armies—have also been subject to scrutiny. While I am not prepared to blame these companies for the spread of fake news, or hold them entirely responsible, it is clear that they are now giants in the communication game and are largely determining the parameters of the digital public sphere. For that reason, it is important for political economists to continue the work pioneered by Christian Fuchs into the financialization of these media giants and the ways in which their vertical and horizontal integration creates new monopoly conditions within the global media industries (Fuchs 2012).

The algorithmic amplification of fake news, which enriches Google and Facebook more than it does young bored Macedonian entrepreneurs, is made possible by the deeply embedded structures of surveillance and big data within the digital economy. User information is collected cheaply by the bots, it is further processed by other algorithmic and machine-learning techniques and then assembled into commodified batches that are on-sold to content distributors and used to direct content back to the original user. Often a human end-user will not even be aware that the content they are seeing has been specifically chosen for them based on their previous browsing or social media history. Thus,

it becomes possible to almost entirely automate the generation and distribution of content—whether reliable or not—using algorithms with the ability to mimic human natural language on social media. As Joanna Burkhardt notes in a moment of bleak humor: "the bot is not interested in the truth or falsehood of the information itself" (Burkhardt 2017: 15).

A number of other factors contribute to the economics of fake news and each, when coupled with one or more of the others, tends to compound the problem even further. The blurring of the once sacrosanct separation between advertising and editorial is a factor in the ability of fake news to slip undetected into the news agenda. A further factor that links fake news to the digital news industry is the use of provocative and often misleading "clickbait" headlines. Clickbait headlines often feature a sensational claim, but they are not always backed up in the article. Globally, the *Daily Mail* brand is notorious for such headlines, which can stretch across three or four lines. Fake news generators have adopted similar tactics to draw in readers. This is effective because research has shown that most people who share news on social media will often do so after only reading the headline. Rarely, it seems, do we check the whole story before clicking like, or send.

Advertising blurring into editorial provides another incentive for the purveyors of fake news. Popular sites, which aggregate the largest audiences for on-selling to advertisers, are rewarded with a larger share of the online advertising pie, creating incentives to push more of the same types of popular content. Online display advertising and click-rate accounting models encourage publishers to generate large audiences for low-cost articles with controversial headlines and outrageous claims. When speed is important, false or misleading claims are published anyway and corrected later if there is enough of an outcry. Either way, the bigger the outrage the higher the click rate and the publisher's goals of generating revenue are achieved. In this way, real news outlets also benefit from fake news that is deliberately created to mislead. By injecting themselves into this already compromised space, the purveyors of fake news can monetize their content and hide it among similarly sensational stories. To some extent, this shows how fake news relies on the psychology of the spectacle and sensation to gain traction.

Newsroom resourcing is also an issue affecting journalists' ability to filter out fake news or "bullshit." Tight deadlines and a 24-hour news clock limit the number of hours a reporter can spend on a story. Shrinking news budgets also mean fewer reporters on any given shift leading to rostered staff having to produce more copy to fill an ever-expanding online news hole. Not only does this allow blatant fabrication to slip through unattended gates, the news hole is also filled with commercial "native advertising" that masquerades as news copy to mimic the "natural" ways in which audiences engage with such content (Sharethrough 2018). Mainstream outlets benefit from native advertising and the passing off of paid content as news-like information.

Finally, the very nature of social media lends itself to the manifestation of false information as truth due to several in-built technological and social factors.

1 Speed: One of the most compelling attractions of social media is speed. Operating at a level of near physical instantaneity, social media allows for the rapid dissemination and peer-to-peer sharing of information. As has been well documented in relation to fact-checking of broadcast and online news, speed has replaced accuracy as a necessary intrinsic value of news-like information. Being first to tell others has replaced being right and accurate as the holy grail of digital journalism.
2 Aggregation: News and news-like information is shared multiple times in second and third-hand posts, reposts and interpretations. Like Chinese whispers, the detail can change over the various retellings.
3 Monetizing the clickstream: We have moved well beyond the first blush and thrill of our relationship with digital media. We have progressed from the digital sublime to the digital mundane. Social media is now the quotidian. Not being connected via social media is now the outlier behavior for people under 75 and this creates large audiences that are available to sell to advertisers, and to create further free content that can be monetized.
4 The problematic "Fourth Estate" ideology of journalism as practiced in western liberal democracies also tends to promote a culture of fake news because the systematic failures of journalism to secure the trust of audiences leaves them cynical, dis-engaged and receptive to fake news generated for both profit and for propaganda.

Fake News Makes the "Post Truth" World Possible

Fake news is hard to define, but I believe it comes in three main flavors: the obviously fake, the easy-to-spot deliberate fake and the subtle fake that almost passes undetected.

The obviously fake should not fool too many people, but it still does. If you have ever read the satirical news website *The Onion* you have come across very clever fake news. It is deliberately outrageous and often quite funny. The best of this category of fake news offers a sharp commentary on real events, but it should not be too hard to spot it as fake. Having said that, a now infamous case of *The Onion* fooling supposedly clever people has gone down as one of the greatest journalistic hoaxes, so far, of the twenty-first century. In 2012 *The Onion* posted a satirical story describing North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un as the site's "sexiest man alive." A few days later the official Chinese government website, *The People's Daily*, reported the story as fact reproducing almost the entire *Onion* article alongside several photographs of the Korean leader. *The*

New York Times was also fooled by an *Onion* piece and reported as fact a fake news item about Barack Obama "singing in the shower" to make himself popular with younger voters (Fallon 2012).

As we discussed earlier, the timing of Oxford Dictionaries' announcement about "post-truth" being 2016's word of the year and the election of Donald Trump was coincidental; but it seems likely that when rival Collins decided that "fake news" would be its word(s) of the year in 2017, they had the president firmly in their sights. In a widely quoted media release, Collins's head of content said the term had dominated political discourse throughout the year:

> "Fake news," either as a statement of fact or as an accusation, has been inescapable this year, contributing to the undermining of society's trust in news reporting: given the term's ubiquity and its regular usage by President Trump, it is clear that Collins' Word of the Year "fake news" is very real news.
>
> *(Hunt 2017)*

We can add to this that the increase in "fake news" being cynically manufactured for propaganda purposes certainly adds to the democracy deficit. We got a stark reminder of this in early 2018 when the National Cybersecurity Center reported that Russian-controlled "bot" accounts had been provoking both pro-gun and anti-gun activists in the wake of yet another tragic school shooting incident in the US (Cybercenter 2018).

Donald Trump was able to bypass much of the mainstream media during the 2016 election season. He delivered his messages straight to his supporters, who were then able to amplify these sound and sight bites via their own social media channels. This was certainly helpful to his campaign, but he also avoided scrutiny on serious issues by turning the election cycle into an emotion-filled circus. By making outrageous and unverifiable claims—that Hillary Clinton was "crooked" for example—Trump spoke directly to the emotional core of his base. Many Trump supporters were silent during the campaign, but they were listening to his key phrases about being the "forgotten" Americans, about how the so-called "elites" and political "insiders" had been ignoring "real" people for decades and how he would "drain the swamp" of Washington politics if he was elected.

Canadian journalism professor Alfred Hermida argues that Trump's victory was built on the media value-add of his supporters "spreading and amplifying subjective and emotional affective news—designed to provoke passion, not [to] inform" (Hermida 2016). There is some truth in this observation that also speaks to the fragmentation of the formerly dominant mainstream news model and the diaspora of news flows that no longer reflect the top-down world of morning newspapers and evening bulletins. Audiences are now circulating news horizontally—between themselves—and in this maelstrom the original source

may be lost or simply overlooked. What once appeared to be careful "fact-checking" by trusted news outlets (it often wasn't) meant that information had to go through at least a minimal verification process; but on social media platforms this step is poorly performed, or simply ignored.

Social media platforms are now a space of "news-like" information rather than hard, verified news (Hirst 2011) This "news-like" information is not rigorously fact-checked; instead audiences "find, support and share, facts, falsehoods and feelings" through their Facebook and Twitter feeds. The very essence of social media is that it is a space "designed to envelop users in the cosy embrace of the familiar, not [to] challenge misinformed views or address unsubstantiated rumours" (Hermida 2016). In the expanding mediascape of social journalism the problem of feelings and falsehoods outweighing actual facts is exponentially greater. As we have seen in this chapter, a lie can spread on the Internet, or via Twitter, faster than a journalist can muster the time or the energy to fact-check it. Today the feedback loop between social media and the mainstream news media is also so fast that a lie can become a news headline before anybody bothers to verify it.

Today everybody needs to take the issue of verification seriously. Whether they are news producers working at the *New York Times* or CNN, social journalists tweeting out news as it happens, or even just an audience member who share news-like information via Facebook and other platforms. In a post-truth world where fake news is difficult to spot at first glance everybody must be a fact-checker. We will return to this issue in chapters eight and nine, in which the possibility for greater efforts to verify news and news-like information is a focus.

A further issue in the ongoing debate about "fake news" and journalistic truth-telling is the bias of the reporter. We can do nothing about the bias of our sources; we can only be aware of their bias and hope to counter that where necessary with other points of view. The bias of the journalist is something that we can deal with, particularly if we are that reporter. If we are honest with ourselves and we are prepared to behave ethically in our role as social journalists, we should have no trouble admitting to our prejudices. Most of the time we don't want to change them, but we should be able to acknowledge how they influence our reporting. Our bias may well inform our motive for wanting to be a reporter, whether in a large news organization like the *New York Times*, the Fox News network or MSNBC, or even if we're working for a small-town news website or print outlet. Bias certainly plays a role in social journalism, in blogging and in partisan political reporting. In these situations, bias is really just another word for our belief system.

The emotional dialectics of journalism—fueled by the dual nature of the news commodity—create a level of unconscious bias in editors and reporters. I have characterized this as the belief system of the News Establishment. Despite this structural impediment, a thoughtful journalist and a media literate lay

person should at least be aware of their own views, beliefs and bias. How would you classify yourself? Are you "liberal," "progressive" or "conservative" in the American context; would you consider yourself "left" "center" or "right" on the political spectrum? Do you believe that global warming is "man-made" or are you in the "deniers" camp? Where do you stand on the major social issues of the day, whatever they are, wherever you are? Even if you identify as "apolitical" you have taken a stand. Are you Christian, Jewish, Muslim or a member of the Plymouth Brethren? Do you belong to an Evangelical church? If you identify with a particular faith, how observant are you? These are only some of the religious choices we make; some of us are agnostic (neither believing, nor disbelieving in the existence of a God) and some are atheists (choosing to have no God). Wherever you fall, or choose to put yourself, on any of these religious and/or political continua, you have beliefs and these beliefs will necessarily inform how you think about the world, how you choose to act in the world and, like it or not, often how other people will judge you. Keeping an "open mind" is not the same as having no core beliefs.

What's all that got to do with journalism in a "post-truth" world? Everything actually. Our belief system—what sociologists and political scientists call an ideology—will also help determine our attitudes to what we believe about the external world and therefore our perceptions of both *truth* and *post-truth*. Bias is also an issue of trust, which appears to be in short supply these days. The rise of fake news also makes it harder for audiences to place trust in the news media. If news consumers feel betrayed by either deliberate or inadvertent fake news stories they are less likely to trust journalists to get it right. In a sense this creates a downward spiral; as we trust media sources less, we tend to rely more on peer-to-peer sharing and information verification. But, as the research shows, a lot of what gets shared in peer-to-peer social media networks is inherently unreliable to begin with. Audience psychology—wanting to feel connected by sharing—combined with high circulation speeds and algorithms that promote popular content, provides a fertile ground for the spread of what one group of researchers called the "digital catnip" of fake news (Carey 2017).

How Are We Going to Deal with "Fake News"?

The problem of fake news is one all of us are going to have to face, whether we are consumers, professional journalists or working in the social journalism space. What we have to understand is that dealing with conspiracy theories and the people who push them is not easy. For those who hold to conspiracy theories any attempt to debunk, or disprove, them usually leads them deeper into their own beliefs. For example, the bizarre story about alleged pedophile rings operating from a popular pizza parlor in Washington DC, with the blessing of senior Democratic Party officials and Hillary Clinton, was able to gain traction among right-wing Trump supporters who were already primed to believe wild

conspiracy theories about their political enemies. In 2017, when credible journalists exposed the alleged Comet Ping Pong pedophile ring as fake news, those who really wanted it to be true began circulating another theory—this time, that 28-year-old Edgar Welsh from North Carolina was a "false flag" operative sent in by Clinton's backers to shoot up the pizza parlor in order to hide the truth of the allegations. One blog site that promoted this new theory was *NewsInsideOut.com*, which claimed that the "false flag" operation was done to discredit those making the accusation, to hide existence of the pedophiles, and to deflect from the activities of the "Global Satanic Ritual Abuse Pedophile Ring." The website also claimed that the "false flag" operation was managed by the same government "PsyOps team" that had exploded the IEDs during the 2013 Boston marathon (Webre 2016). Another site, with obvious pro-Trump leanings, *Conservative Daily Post*, also carried the "false flag" narrative adding the detail that a CTV camera on the street outside Comet Ping Pong had been moved and peppering its report with tweets supporting the conspiracy theory (Bougis 2016).

The #PizzaGate conspiracy was also an active sub-Reddit thread in the main "conspiracy" thread where Welch's brief career as an actor was discussed, alongside more wild accusations of pedophile rings and Satanic rituals.

While it is nearly impossible to counter the most ridiculous conspiracy theories and fake news memes that emerge in social media and blog posts, there should be some way of dealing with other categories; particularly when they are based in reporting by news organizations that are supposedly more reliable than the highly partisan blogs on the fringes of political discourse. The promotion of fake news, either wittingly or unwittingly, is a big issue for the News Establishment and mainstream news organizations whose reputations have suffered over the past decade as their credibility and reliability have fallen in the eyes of consumers. As we know, readers, listeners and viewers are deserting mainstream media, or are so cynical that they choose not to believe anything. As one contributor to the debate following the 2016 US election pointed out,

Purpose of Pizzagate false flag shooting explained

NewsInsideOut.com

By Alfred Lambremont Webre

BLAINE, WA. – The shooter Patsy in the Comet Pizzagate False Flag Shooting is identified as Edgar Maddison Welch, who played the part of the SHOOTER in the Movie "Something About Pizza!" Welch's acting chops and history qualify him as a "Crisis actor" in the Pizzagate false flag "psyop" operation.

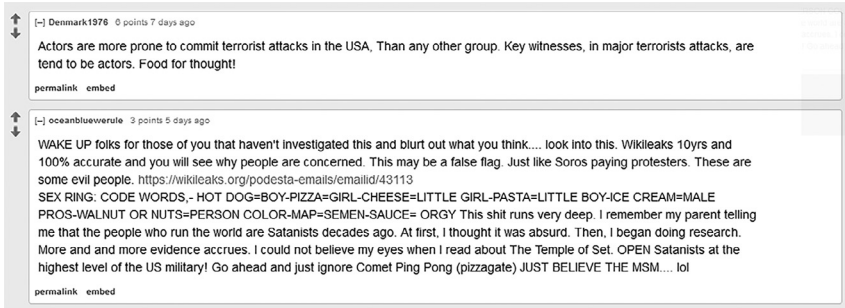**FIGURE 4.1**   The False Flag Narrative Was Carried on Sites Like NewsInsideOut.com.

FIGURE 4.2   Sub-Reddit Group in the Main "Conspiracy" Thread Discussing #PizzaGate.

some individuals and groups are so dissociated from what is real or factual that they don't even see fake news as problematic: "Some people really don't see that they have been duped or finding out later that it is fake as a problem" (Nelson S 2016).

Despite recognizing fake news as a problem, there are few workable solutions being offered in the marketplace. The obstacles to dealing with fake news appear huge at the moment; not only is it hard to eradicate, as we've been discussing, it is actually quite difficult to identify.

The first issue is deciding what constitutes fake news and what is merely bias in reporting. On overtly partisan sites—such as those of the avowedly left and the right—the bias is usually obvious to astute readers, but it is not so easy to spot on more mainstream news outlets. Added to this is the volume of "advertorial" or sponsored content that appears in the guise of news. Such content is not always clearly labelled and if it looks like news many are likely to see it as such and not take into account built-in commercial bias.

The second problem, linked to the issue of partisanship is "objectivity." Is there really any objectivity in the news media today? It is certainly hard to find news that is entirely impartial or that is *only* factual. News has never really been without bias; there is an element of interpretation in every news story and with interpretation comes the privileging of one viewpoint over another. Allied to the problem of objectivity is the obvious issue of news that is poorly sourced or invalidated because it is badly written and perhaps from an unreliable news outlet. Linked to this issue is the very real psychological divide between "rationalist" and "intuitionist" thinking. Rationalists are willing to take on board empirical data and facts, then to apply logic and reason in order to arrive at a rational worldview. On the other side, intuitionists are prone to emotive responses gut feelings and metaphor, which we sometimes call "motivated reasoning," or even "magical thinking" (Swan 2016). As we've been

discussing, conspiracy theories work with intuitive thinking, rather than a rational exposition of facts and data. These intuitions are then confirmed through what psychologists call "confirmation bias"—that is, we tend to gravitate towards people and ideas that confirm our own prejudices, or reinforce our core beliefs (Malcolm and Willis 2016). Increasing our digital media literacy and developing our rational thinking capabilities are ways in which we can become more attuned to bias in the news.

The third dilemma is sorting out who and how fake news is to be called out. Who can be trusted to be the "umpire"? Fact-checking is an expensive and time-consuming task in any news organization and when resources are difficult to come by, fact-checking is one of the first activities that gets cut. On social media sites like Facebook the problem is made more complex by the sheer volume of material being shared among users. As we noted, Facebook came under fire following the 2016 US election because of the number of fake news items allegedly spread via "likes" and "shares." According to an analysis by *Buzzfeed*, fake news was shared more than real news items and as more fake stories were shared, the number of verified news stories being shared fell (Silverman 2016). The backlash prompted Facebook executives to face up to the issue and the public pressure seemed to lead to divisions within the company. While CEO Mark Zuckerberg defended Facebook, engineers at the social media giant were telling the media that a technical fix might be possible—if the company would face up and take ownership of the problem.

Facebook's head of AI research, Yann LeCun, was reported as saying that the artificial intelligence necessary to filter fake news was either ready or could be made ready for deployment if the company chose to do so (Gershgorn 2016). Other experts told *The Guardian* that Facebook was unlikely to block fake news because the financial returns generated by the volume of sharing was too tempting to executives and shareholders (Solon 2016).

It seems that reliable AI—algorithms that can filter the "good" from the "fake" news—is still some way from being perfected and deployed. There are several technical problems with AI which can be summarized as it is not yet capable of inference and detecting nuanced meaning in the sentences it reads. Also, in the final instance, AI relies on humans building the extensive databases it needs to verify the material it is cross-checking. In the end though, I think we'd all prefer to trust humans to be the gatekeepers and curators. The problem is, our trust in the gatekeepers of twentieth-century journalism is waning (Swift 2016) and is likely to run out before a suitable replacement can be deployed. In 2016, Facebook considered hiring more human fact-checkers, but found the cost too high. Instead, Facebook's fact-checking has been outsourced to so-called partner organizations, but it is underfunded and woefully inadequate. Efforts are ongoing, but even the scheme's supporters acknowledge they are only "scratching the surface" and that thousands of false stories are not checked due to lack of resources (Sharockman 2017).

At the same time, as the wild allegations about Russian hacking of the election or planting malware in the Vermont electricity grid show, the problem of "fake" news is not confined to social media. The speed at which news circulates today, combined with competition for stories and eyeballs, means that even respectable and mainstream news organizations, like the *NYT*, the *WaPo* and Reuters news agency can be gamed into promoting fake news items that gain traction because of the legitimacy of these famous brands. Towards the end of 2017 a number of media organizations were caught out in covering stories that they could not back up, or that turned out to be false. A string of mistakes led to some high-profile journalists losing their jobs. A number of the mis-reported stories were about Donald Trump, his associates and the FBI investigation into the Russian meddling allegations. The end result of this was that Donald Trump was able to renew his attacks on the mainstream news media and its credibility suffered yet another severe blow (Greenwald 2017b). If we cannot rely on the once reliable news media to effectively weed out unreliable news any more, what can we do?

Media Literacy as One Answer to the Spread of "Fake News"

I am not, at this point, offering a cure to the problem of fake news, though others have attempted to do so, notably within a normative framework that privileges the liberal democratic notion of the Fourth Estate (McNair 2018). No doubt, there is need of an antidote to the spread of anti-democratic false narratives in journalism, but I doubt that the Fourth Estate paradigm holds the answers. Rather, I assert here that the ideological paradigm in which the Fourth Estate operates makes the News Establishment part of the problem and complicit—even if unwittingly—in the growth and spread of fake news. The solution is a much more radical overhaul of the news production process—with workers' control at its heart (Hirst 2011)—but there is not the space to explore that here. The seriousness with which a variety of American commentators—from Trump's own conservative side of politics, as well as "liberals"—are now calling into question the very premise of American democratic norms and processes shows just how toxic Trump has become to the body politic. His ongoing tirade of abuse towards the American news media, and his characterization of them as "fake news," is reason enough to take the issue seriously. However, for political economy of communication there is a deeper, underlying issue: How did it come to this?

As argued in this chapter, to answer this question requires an understanding of media and communication that goes beyond normative scholarly approaches and that combines political economy and critical theory. The explosion of "fake news" that we've experienced since 2016 is the result of several inter-twining and dialectical factors. It is both a manipulation of symbolic content to suit a particular political agenda—the Trump factor—and also an almost inevitable

by-product of the collapse of the old media news paradigm. The combination of audience cynicism, falling levels of trust in news media, linked to the news media's own problems (rush to publish, lack of resources, etc.), and a growing reliance on algorithms, all contribute to the rise in fake news distribution (Himma-Kadakas 2017). There is—to re-introduce a term from chapter one—a process of mutual constitution and mediation occurring, between the political forces of Trump's rhetorical fixation and operationalization of the "fake news" meme, and the imploding news industry desperate to cling to its own dwindling social, cultural and economic power; as conceptualized in the "Fourth Estate" model and practiced by the News Establishment.

The role of ideology—as reflected through the media's Fourth Estate model—is to normalize this ignorance through the "manufacture of consent" (Herman and Chomsky 1988) and to a great extent it is consent based on false representations of the reality of capitalism. Manufactured consent is, at the same time, and necessarily, manufactured ignorance. Consent is manufactured on the back of a series of lies, which must be maintained in order for the underlying system to be maintained: "This situation is partly a function of ideological blindness, and partly a reflection of the all-too-human desire to believe in positive scenarios such as the well-known, but hypothetical, 'free lunch'" (Betancourt 2010).

However, as I've argued here, the Fourth Estate model—as an ideological safety-valve that normalizes commodity journalism and the News Establishment—is itself problematic and disintegrating under the pressures of economics and technology. Only a critical political economy approach can adequately deal with this fact, and explain how the social system of capitalism relies on general and mass ignorance for its survival. As Betancourt notes there is a "social dynamic of misinformation" in play, which can be recognized as a key dialectic and contradiction in the manufacture of consent, and which, when played out in full, can eventually lead to the unmasking of the lies at the core of pro-capitalist ideology.

It seems, as Trump's desperate clinging on to the trope of "fake news" shows, the spread of lies and the techniques of "gaslighting" are effective for periods of time, particularly when repeated in a directed way at an audience pre-conditioned to be receptive. In this context, they sow confusion and cynicism, leading to an effective disarming of any potential psychological resistance: "The creation of systemic unknowns where any potential 'fact' is always already countered by an alternative of apparently equal weight and value renders engagement with the conditions of reality . . . contentious and a source of confusion" (Betancourt 2010).

Trump's conservative forces are reliant on this confusion and the disengage-ment it engenders to mask the seriously undemocratic and anti-worker agenda that is at the core of his "Make America Great Again" project. It is important to criticize both MAGA and Trump's use of the fake news trope in order to arm the resistance to it. Progressive political economy should play a role in this.

I have argued here that while constant chants of "fake news" from the Trump White House are real and important—in the way that they can lead to a de-activation of citizenship and therefore reinforce his "base only" strategy—they are not the only category of fake news worth investigating. Importantly there are economic factors in play which generate a market for fake news—such as the Russian and Chinese "dark net" services that provide automated promotional social media activities on a commercial basis (Gu, Kropotov and Yarochkin 2017)—and which extend to the commercial activities of Facebook and Google, among others.

I've also suggested that an over-emphasis on Trump's operationalization of fake news, without a deeper critical understanding of fake news, weakens any critique and serves to reinforce the ideology of the Fourth Estate. The problematic nature of the Fourth Estate model is highlighted by the number of mistakes made by mainstream reporters in covering the Russian interference stories throughout 2017. As we noted in the previous chapter, over-zealous reporters were too reliant on official sources and too readily believed information they were given without being able to fully verify it for themselves. This only served to reinforce Trump's fake news narrative and it can only further erode trust in the Fourth Estate news media. Conservative *New York Post* columnist David Harsanyi made an interesting point that American political reporters were damaging their own credibility—and that of their publisher—by rushing to publish stories that turned out to be false:

> The fact that many political journalists (not all) have a political agenda is not new, but if they become a proxy of operatives who peddle falsehoods, they will soon lose credibility with an even bigger swath of the country. They will have themselves to blame.
>
> *(Harsanyi 2017)*

At the core of this problem for the mainstream media was an over-reliance on official sources, and a willingness to believe, rather than actually checking facts for themselves. Such elementary mistakes can only lead to more cynical disengagement by citizens in the public sphere, at a time when we need to be encouraging more active participation in politics and communicative actions by marginalized and dispossessed citizens. The additional mistake of not being transparent with audiences about how the mistakes were made in the first place (Greenwald 2017b) adds to the news media's problems. Deepening our understanding of fake news is a precursor to helping establish effective strategies to defeat it and prevent its corrosive impacts of the public sphere. As suggested in this chapter, "fake news" is a symptom of the current twin crises afflicting modern mainstream journalism; the declining trust factor, and the broken business models. It is to these issues that we turn in the next chapter to ask: Can journalism be saved from itself?

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