

Introduction

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Just before the 2016 U.S. presidential election, fake news producers, conspiracy theorists, and alt-right trolls circulated a *Newsweek* cover featuring Hillary Clinton under the words “Madam President” as “proof” of “the media” and Democrats conspiring to rig the election.¹ One conspiracy website, D.C. Clothesline, posted the image with the headline “The Fix Is In: *Newsweek* Already Has an Issue in Print, Boxed and Ready to Ship, Declaring Hillary Clinton the Winner.”² A corresponding “article” linked to another website found simply through an IP address (<http://82.221.129.208>), which is apparently the home of “World Class Investigative Truth” provided by Jim Stone, a self-identified “deplorable freelance journalist.” Stone corroborated the information on his website and linked to a tweet by Milo Yiannopoulos, an infamous alt-right troll and then a technology editor for Breitbart, displaying the same photograph captioned, in part, “they are going to steal it.”

Unsurprisingly, this “proof” turned out to be a strategy that news organizations use all the time. *Newsweek* had produced *two* covers, one saying “President Trump” and the other saying “Madam President,” in order to have the correct cover immediately ready for purchase after the election. Despite the obvious explanation for the “Madam President” cover, the decontextualized—and misleadingly selected and captioned—information became “evidence” of a conspiracy that quickly traveled across a maze of dubious information sources. This example demonstrates one way that false information circulates on the web, but more importantly, it also reveals the need to examine fake news as beyond just a type of misinformation; fake news is part of much larger political, cultural, and social issues of concern. Fake news is a symptom of deep-rooted problems as much as it is itself a problem. Behind the fake news articles capitalizing on the circulation of

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this story across social media exists a deeper confluence of issues, including the coordinated politicization and weaponization of information, public distrust of news organizations, and even the failures of technology and information platforms to acknowledge their role in both exacerbating and solving the spread of misinformation.

What Is Fake News?

Fake news has come to mean many things. In communication and media studies it most often referred to satire like *The Onion* or *The Colbert Report*, but now it is also false news exported from Macedonia or created in a living room in Missouri by a guy who just wants to make extra money. The term is used to describe stories created and distributed by propaganda news outlets in Russia attempting to influence global politics. It is used when referring to the hyperpartisan articles on websites like Breitbart that commonly wrap a kernel of truth in a false context in order to rile up their readers. The term *fake news* is used to label conspiracies, junk science presented with clickbait-style headlines, content aggregators circulating misleading gossip, and even national news organizations.

For the purposes of this book, fake news is primarily produced by individuals who are concerned *not* with gathering and reporting information to the world, but rather with generating profit through the social media circulation of false information mimicking the style of contemporary news. Of course, credible news organizations have the potential to distribute false news in the form of “breaking news” errors and inaccuracies that are subsequently corrected or retracted, but spreading false news is not their strategy for profitability. News organizations have a mandate to do journalism, even if it’s low-quality journalism, while fake news creators do not. Additionally, the number of false news stories emerging from credible sources tends to be few and far between rather than a constant flow of purposefully crafted sensational, emotionally charged, misleading, or otherwise totally made-up information. Fake news is neither CNN—regardless of its many faults—nor disagreement over particular assessments or interpretations of information; rather, it’s unverifiable information rooted in an unreality that hinders our collective abilities to make sense of the world.

Fake news can achieve huge circulation numbers, sometimes earning hundreds of thousands of shares on social media. One of the most shared fake news stories is from the online “newspaper” the *Denver Guardian*,

falsely writing, “FBI agent suspected in Hillary email leaks found dead in apartment murder suicide [sic],” which earned almost six hundred thousand shares. An article from a fake news website, WTOE 5, alleged, “Pope Francis shocks world, endorses Donald Trump for president,” and it engendered almost a million shares by readers both outraged (likely by those on the political left) and excited (likely by those on the political right) by such information. These fake stories achieved similar or higher levels of circulation in comparison to some of the most shared news stories from established organizations like the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, and CNN. Of course, hundreds, if not thousands, of other fake news stories are shared only minimally (or not at all), but the same can be said for the wide variations in engagement numbers for actual news stories. Yet some evidence suggests that the top fake news stories circulated between August and November 2016, for example, had more overall social media engagements (shares, likes, and comments) than the top actual news stories circulated during the same period.³

However, looking at fake news in isolation downplays the complexity and messiness of our digital age. Fake news is a problem mostly because it exists alongside the massive audience for and influence of unreliable and hyperpartisan websites like Breitbart, which saw 18 million unique visitors per month at its height and whose stories spread across a vast network of propagandistic and fake news websites.⁴ These propagandistic websites—as well as corresponding social media accounts and pages—are designed to influence, reinforce, and mobilize people around particular political beliefs while attacking and destabilizing journalism and our faith in certain institutions and figures.⁵ When we add satire, native advertising, memes, conspiracy theories, hoaxes, and decontextualized viral videos to this fake news and propaganda mix, it becomes even more challenging for us to make sense of the information we encounter in our daily lives. While we must be intentional in defining and analyzing each of these kinds of misinformation, it’s important to consider them interrelated and as constituting a much larger communicative problem in the digital age.

Fake News and the Circuit of Media Study

We need to understand fake news as an emerging type of online misinformation, and as one part of a larger misinformation problem, but we need to do so by making sense of the multiple, overlapping factors that enable,

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constrain, and shape its production, distribution, and reception. In fact, we need to use an integrated approach to media studies, or what Julie D'Acci refers to as the “circuit of media study,” to fully grapple with all of the interconnected aspects of fake news and other forms of online misinformation.⁶ This model encourages us to consider the way ideas, discourses, and practices influence, overlap, contradict, and circulate between porous spheres of production (everything from the political economy of fake news to regulation and policy), sociohistorical contexts, reception, and the cultural artifacts or fake news texts themselves. As danah boyd rightly points out, addressing fake news is going to “require a cultural change about how we make sense of information, whom we trust, and how we understand our own role in grappling with information.”⁷ I would also add that addressing fake news is going to require changes to who produces information, how information is produced, the mechanisms of distribution, and the forces that influence decision-making and specific practices along the way. And considering fake news and other kinds of misinformation through the circuit of media study, through thinking about the mutually constitutive aspects of politics, policy, social media, journalism, and reception, among other things, may offer us the best chance of cultural change, productive policy decisions, technological accountability, and just making sense of our complex and contradictory digital age.

Let's start with thinking about fake news in relation to *news*. Fake news has existed as long as news, and always in a variety of forms, as many of the chapters in this book will explore. Yellow journalism, tabloids, satire, and our long history of magazine and newspaper hoaxes, such as the Great Moon Hoax, reports of a killer hawk terrorizing Chicago, or claims of a seven-headed monster with goat legs in Caledonia, are all inherently connected to news as a historical reality. Newspapers could generate huge profits by printing these fantastic tales, but the eventual professionalization of journalism and increased importance of news prestige and reputation placed greater emphasis on accurately and *objectively* reporting actual events.

However, objectivity itself fosters different types of bias toward maintaining the status quo, or, in other words, toward the interests of business leaders, government officials, and other elites, usually at the expense of everyday citizens.⁸ In addition to problems with “objectivity,” in order to be profitable in the current media environment, which is characterized by

the folding of newspapers, journalist layoffs, ownership concentration, and greater emphases on profit instead of the public good, news organizations have to rely on problematic categories of newsworthiness (“If it bleeds, it leads”) and the proliferation of pundits whose only purpose seems to be taking up airtime. Because it’s cheaper and easier to do, news organizations focus on short-term stories—horse-race election coverage, the daily twists of the stock market—and not enough deal consistently and seriously with issues that affect people’s lives in a way that explores not only what is happening, but also why and what can be done about it. When we also consider the concerted effort to diminish the legitimacy of the press by conservative media makers over the past several decades, it becomes clear why a significant portion of the population distrusts “the media.”⁹ Of course, distrust varies widely by news outlet and individual, but overall, people trust the press—and increasingly the premise of an objective press—less than they once did.

Although these high levels of news distrust are alarming, they’re also understandable. For instance, what does it mean for “news” when dozens of news and entertainment websites report that CNN accidentally aired thirty minutes of pornography in the Boston television market and it’s revealed that these stories are entirely based on two hoax tweets? Or when a fake website just a few days old, specifically the *Florida Sun Post*, publishes a made-up story about a millionaire accidentally marrying his granddaughter and it’s picked up by AOL News, FoxNews.com, *The Independent*, Complex, and the *New York Post*, among others?¹⁰ Are these indeed examples of the “real” news producing, or at least circulating, fake news, too? These humorous examples are not to suggest that news organizations like *The Independent* should be labeled fake news, but rather to demonstrate both the complexity of the fake news problem and how it’s made worse by current journalistic practices. These examples also demonstrate that the line between news and fake news is far blurrier than it should be, and this makes telling the difference between news and fake news far more difficult than it should be.

Although the history and contemporary realities of journalism are particularly important to understanding fake news, we know through the circuit of media study that it’s only part of the misinformation problem. To more fully understand the relationship between news and fake news, we need to consider how technologies alter and disrupt news production and

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distribution practices. Google and Facebook collect about 70 percent of all digital advertising sales in the United States, receiving a vast majority of digital advertising growth year after year.¹¹ The lack of digital advertising growth for newspapers is a serious problem because traditional advertising revenue also continues to decline.¹² Couple this with the explosion of legitimate and not-so-legitimate online newsrooms and the competition for online advertising dollars and audiences is fierce. Declining advertising revenue and competition for readers mean relying on clickbait-style headlines to try to generate engagement on social media. Financial pressure also means a greater emphasis on entertainment, soft news, and sensationalism that is more likely to be shared on social media. And this means using more native advertising as well as producing more articles based on the information provided by newswires and secondary reporting (too often without checking the information found in the original reporting)¹³ because it's cheaper than assigning a reporter to cover a story or investigate an issue. And these practices are likely to further erode public confidence and trust in news.

Not only do changes in the technological landscape affect news and fake news revenue, and thus news and fake news practices, but search engine algorithms and social media play important roles in the production and distribution of all kinds of "news." Shortly after the election of Donald Trump, the number one Google news item for the popular vote was a fake news website, 70news.wordpress.com, erroneously saying that Hillary Clinton lost the popular vote. If you searched Google for information about potential collusion between Russia and Donald Trump in May 2017, the first results that appear are propagandistic, conspiracy-oriented, and unreliable websites like the *Washington Free Beacon*, Infowars, and the Daily Caller, respectively.¹⁴ Google is similarly criticized for the misleading and false, not to mention sexist, racist, nationalist, and hate-filled, queries that auto-fill search boxes and search results that appear first when people look up topics about women, people of color, Judaism, or Islam.¹⁵

Combine the frequency of specious Google results with millions of Twitter bots synchronously pushing fake news, viral memes on Imgur and Reddit circulating misleading "facts," and Russian agents buying Facebook ads to target specific groups with propaganda, and it's clear that fake news is as much an issue of technology—both how it functions algorithmically and how individuals use it—as it is a matter of journalism.¹⁶ Yet interrogating

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the context of journalism in relation to technology is also necessary but insufficient for understanding fake news without considering why users of Facebook might knowingly or unknowingly share a fake news article. Paralleling the pressures of immediacy on financially strapped newsrooms is the speed by which we can share information on social media, with some evidence suggesting that many of us share without actually reading what we are sharing.¹⁷ Evidence also suggests that whether we trust a person who shares a news article on social media matters more than the news source in how we assess information, even if the news source is unknown.¹⁸ Furthermore, how do phenomena like filter bubbles or echo chambers—or the “bullshit” emerging from trendy discussions of these things¹⁹—influence how we individually and collectively understand and engage with fake news? How do we push back against inaccuracies and outright lies when corrections and debunking typically either fail to reach the same audience or fail to gain the same kind of audience reach in comparison to the original information?²⁰ What should we do when debunking or corrections only serve to reinforce the original misinformation for some readers or watchers?²¹ For example, the debunking of #Pizzagate, a conspiracy accusing Hillary Clinton of being at the center of a child sex-trafficking ring run out of a pizza shop, led to a man “self-investigating” the incident and opening fire in the shop.²² News of the “self-investigation,” in another bizarre twist, then inspired a secondary conspiracy circulated by fake news websites: the mainstream media *planted* the Comet Ping Pong pizzeria gunman as a “false flag” in a plot to shut down alternative media sources.²³ Years later and Comet Ping Pong is still defending against these rumors and an attempt to burn the establishment down.²⁴

We will neither fully understand fake news and other kinds of misinformation nor make a dent in addressing it, unless we think about it through the circuit of media study, through the reciprocal influences and interactions of our political context, journalism, social media, policy, reception, and fake news as part of a larger misinformation problem. Too often we treat these areas as distinct, which means that we identify media literacy, greater tech company accountability, or changes in contemporary journalism as solutions without considering the intertwined relationships between all of the above. While this project does utilize these categories for organizational purposes, numerous authors think through multiple areas of influence in their analyses. This book is thus an attempt to consider fake news

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across these areas of inquiry, and from a variety of perspectives and academic disciplines, with the hope of working toward better understanding and changing the underlying issues creating the context for fake news and online misinformation to flourish.

Overview

Many of the chapters in this collection reflect on the hysteria surrounding fake news and other kinds of online misinformation just before and after the 2016 U.S. presidential election. And many of the issues identified during this period remain unchanged or unresolved years later. The aim of this collection goes beyond just analyzing that particular moment in time, although it is an important one. Every day the problem of misinformation seems to get stranger (a fake news website posing as a fact-checking outlet) or more serious (the Taliban's expanding propaganda machine).²⁵ Thus, this book historicizes and considers various current contexts exacerbating the circulation of misinformation, which will undoubtedly have an impact on the future of our knowledge systems as well as technological, political, regulatory, and cultural changes (or lack thereof).

This collection is organized into eight parts: Politics, Journalism, Law and Policy, Social Media, Reception, History, Media Hoaxes and Satire, and Solutions. Although some chapters could exist in more than one part as many of these issues are interrelated, we placed them in the part in which they are in the most direct conversation. For example, many of the authors in this collection discuss different solutions to fake news as part of their analyses, including the need for technological or regulatory changes to social media platforms, but one part focuses specifically on solutions to online misinformation.

Chapters in this collection primarily come from scholars in the fields of communication, media studies, and journalism, but it also includes the perspectives of scholars of psychology, comparative literature, and computer science, among others. While fake news is a problem that transcends national boundaries, the large number of issues and contexts to consider just within the United States already makes this a huge undertaking. Not every contributor to this collection will agree on what we can or should do about fake news and the underlying problems that create space for the

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wider circulation of misleading or misinforming information, yet through those very disagreements and contradictions we hope a useful framework emerges for addressing misinformation in many of its iterations and complexities.

Notes

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