

## **A Brief History (and Future) of Fake News**

Dr. Robert N. Spicer

Assistant Professor of Digital Journalism

Millersville University

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### **I. Introduction**

Every political campaign has its little standout moments and buzzwords. One thing that will forever be associated with the 2016 presidential election between Democrat Hillary Clinton and Republican Donald Trump is the concept of “fake news.” Not only did specific news stories set off partisan debates about what was fake and what was real, the concept itself became the subject of conflict. On its face it might seem a pretty straightforward concept. It refers to news stories that are not real, right? Unsurprisingly, once this seemingly simple concept goes through the grinder of partisan politics, what it means becomes muddied. This is by design because, just as Charles Lewis (2014) said of the tobacco industry, with political campaign and PR machines: “Doubt is their product. And their enemy? The unpalatable truth” (p. 152).

Because of the muddiness of this debate, the purpose of the introduction for this paper is to suss out what the term means and how it has evolved, especially in recent years. This, in essence, sets up the thesis of this paper, which is a simple ten words: fake news is not new and it’s not going away. Despite all of the buzz around the phrase that accompanied the most recent presidential campaign, which might give the public the impression that they were living through something unprecedented on this front, the “fake news” propaganda techniques that are now infamously a part of our collective memory of 2016 have been a part of American political media for centuries.

This paper is broken into four sections. This introduction will proceed by looking at how the term has evolved recently, discussing some examples, and proposing a formal definition of

how the term should be used. The second section will explore some of the highlights from the long history of examples of what might be classified as “fake news.” This will lead into section three, which will discuss some concerns about the future of fake news. Finally, the paper will conclude with a discussion of the relationship between politicians and the news media and how the discourse about political bias in news media has poisoned the well of public trust and led us into this Trumpian conversation of “fake news.”

### **Fake News as Satire**

The term “fake news” in the popular parlance of American political media might seem new. Politifact named it the 2016 Lie of the Year (Holan, 2016). However, a quick search of communication and media studies research databases shows it has been with us for quite some time, although used in a very different way from what it has come to mean in the Trump era. In that iteration, fake news referred to *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, and the variety of other comedy shows that aped the news format in satirical fashion. The term itself is old but the practice is even older. This point is humorously driven home by Jeet Heer (2017), senior editor at *The New Republic*, who recently tweeted, “I completely support MSNBC’s decision to fire Jonathan Swift over his horrific proposal to eat Irish babies;” an amusing comment on fake news as political satire and how the audience can sometimes miss the joke.<sup>1</sup>

The audience potentially missing the joke is one of the greatest dangers of this version of fake news. These satirical news programs such as *The Daily Show*, rose to prominence during the Bush and Obama years and continued into the Trump Administration. By 2008 *The New York Times* was asking if Jon Stewart, the host of *The Daily Show*, was the most trusted man in America. Noting the ever-increasing intersection of information and entertainment in *real news*,

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<sup>1</sup> In 1729 Jonathan Swift wrote a satirical essay in which he recommended that the solution to poverty for the Irish was to sell their babies to butchers (Fox, 2003).

Michiko Kakutani (2008) argues, “it's been “The Daily Show” that has tenaciously tracked big, ‘super depressing’ issues like the cherry-picking of prewar intelligence, the politicization of the Department of Justice and the efforts of the Bush White House to augment its executive power” (para. 5). A year later an online *Time* poll found that Stewart was the most trusted newscaster, receiving 44% of the vote from respondents and beating out all three national evening news anchors at the time (Linkins, 2009). A 2014 Pew study found that 16% of respondents trusted *The Daily Show* as a source of information, more than the number who said they trusted many other news sources such as *The Economist*, *The New Yorker*, and *The Guardian*; and more than opinion and commentary sources such as Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, *Slate*, and *Mother Jones* (Pew, 2014).

Stewart was introduced in his infamous appearance on the now defunct CNN political debate program *Crossfire* as “the most trusted name in fake news” (Love, 2007, p. 33). In his discussion of fake news for *The Columbia Journalism Review (CJR)* Robert Love (2007) says the term has been applied to a wide variety of content including, but not limited to, false information leading to the Spanish American War, a fake history of the bathtub, doctored war photos from *The L.A. Times* and Reuters, and, of course, the satire of *The Daily Show*. The difference between that last example and the others on that list is that the consumer (hopefully) knows that what they are watching is satire while the others are presented as authentic despite the fact that they are misinformation.

While Pew, *Time*, and *The New York Times* show the audience seems to be thinking otherwise, Jon Stewart made many attempts to remind his audience that he was an entertainer, not a journalist. In that appearance CNN’s *Crossfire* Stewart told the program’s hosts that what they do was “hurting America.” Much to the joy of the audience he argued that the program was

inauthentic and was not true debate. Conservative host Tucker Carlson questioned Stewart's authenticity and criticized him for not asking then Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry tough enough questions. To this Stewart replied, "You're on CNN. The show leading into me is puppets making crank phone calls. What is wrong with you?" (CNN, 2004). So, if the audience was confused about whether Jon Stewart was a real journalist it was not because he was pretending to be one. He was up front about how he saw himself.

The research on audience perceptions of satirical fake news is a mixed bag. Two studies in particular stand in contrast demonstrating the upside and downside to this genre. On the upside is Bruce Hardy et al.'s (2014) examination of Stephen Colbert's effect on viewer knowledge of campaign finance. In 2012 Colbert, playing his satirical, right-wing talk show host, ran for president but only appeared on the ballot in his home state of South Carolina. During the campaign, he and *Daily Show* host Jon Stewart played out a series of comedy segments in which they discussed Stewart's management of Colbert's super PAC. One particularly informative segment involved Stewart and Colbert engaged in a live phone conversation with a campaign finance lawyer who explained the ins and outs of the regulation of such organizations.

For this study Hardy et al. analyzed telephone interviews conducted with 1,232 adults. They hypothesized that respondents who watched *The Colbert Report* would have greater knowledge of super PACs and 501(c)(4) organizations. Their research indicated that viewing the program did in fact increase self-reported knowledge and showed "clear evidence that watching *The Colbert Report* significantly increased accurate knowledge of super PACs and 501(c)(4) groups" (p. 345). Not only did the program increase viewer knowledge, "it did so at a greater rate than any other news source" (p. 347).

On the downside there is LaMarre et al.'s (2009) study of how political perspective influences the viewer's perceptions of satirical fake news. They hypothesized that conservative viewers would interpret Colbert's satire as genuine rather than making fun of conservatives. LaMarre et al. conducted a survey with 332 undergraduate students. The respondents watched a video clip in which Colbert interviewed liberal talk show host Amy Goodman in his satirical persona. They found that "individual-level political conservatism was a significant predictor ... of perceptions that Colbert was using humor but truly meant what he said about liberals" (pp. 222-223). Their findings echo earlier research from the 1970s looking at sitcom character Archie Bunker. Bunker's character expressed bigoted viewpoints in order to satirize them but Vidmar (1974) found that viewers who shared Bunker's bigotry saw him as affirming their views rather than criticizing them.

Research on fake news as satire has looked at the topic from a variety of other angles beyond audience effects. Reilly (2012) examines the ways in which "satirical fake news responds to the everyday discursive realities of newsgathering practices" (p. 273). This analysis uses examples from how *The Daily Show* and *The Onion* "reported" on serious matters such as the Iraq War and Middle East conflict. Balmas (2014) used survey data and a content analysis of real news and satirical content during the 2006 Israeli election to look for connections between exposure to satirical news and feelings of efficacy, alienation, and cynicism. This study found that the negative portrayal of politicians in satirical news affected viewers who did not also view real news, which tempered the potentially negative effects of increased cynicism resulting from the satire. Brewer, Young, and Morreale (2013) similarly found a link between cynicism and the viewing of satirical news. However, their research also found that combined exposure to hard news and satirical news, such as *The Colbert Report*, resulted in an increase in the viewer's sense

of political efficacy. Finally, Day and Thompson (2012) looked at the SNL fake news segment “Weekend Update,” arguing that it, unlike *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, has never had any pretense of informing its viewers, and rather than “provid[ing] satire or political comment, [has acted] as a familiar segment and episode linchpin” (p. 177).

### **Fake News as a Political Tool**

A useful lens for thinking about the discourse around fake news is that of conspiracy theory. There are a number of important researchers and writers who have tackled this issue. Most important among them is probably Jack Bratich (2008) and Mark Fenster (2008). The key argument Bratich makes perfectly in a contribution to the Media Commons project *in Media Res*. There Bratich (2013) argues that on a list of conspiracy theories compiled for an article in the *Houston Chronicle* the incidents have only one thing in common: “someone at some point has ridiculed them” (para. 3). The list in question includes, among other things, the claim that the Indianapolis Colts lost the 1969 Super Bowl on purpose because their coach had placed a \$3 million bet on the New York Jets to win, the government uses chemtrails (exhaust from planes) to control our minds, and that pharmaceutical companies are hiding the cure for cancer, which they have already developed.

Just as the term “conspiracy theory” is a weapon to undermine political arguments that are outside of the mainstream, “fake news” has become “weaponized by politicians who use it to undermine independent journalism in an effort to reach the public directly through their own channels” (Derakhshan and Wardle, 2017, para. 3). In the context of 2016 it came to mean two things. Derakhshan and Wardle (2017) argue that in the past its definition was pretty easy to nail down. Fake news “described a particular type of website that used the same design templates as

professional news websites but its contents were entirely fabricated” (para. 2). This is the closest thing to the first definition of fake news.

Two key articles after the campaign stood out as sources of consternation for those who were concerned about the phenomenon. First, there was the BuzzFeed analysis of fake news stories and which ones in particular received the most attention. Craig Silverman (2016) found that the circulation for fabricated stories on Facebook outnumbered that of factual reporting from mainstream news sources (para. 2-3). He also found that 17 of the 20 top performing false stories to appear on the social network were either pro-Trump or anti-Clinton (para 9). So, while Silverman does not make an argument about whether such fake news swayed the electorate in general, or any section of it, toward voting for Trump, he does demonstrate how such stories circulated broadly, how their content favored then-candidate Trump, and how those Facebook pages responsible for them saw increases in their user engagement.

Silverman also found that many of the fake news stories were coming from openly hyper-partisan sources on Facebook. However, the second significant piece of reporting on fake news shows that there were people circulating such stories with motives other than partisanship. In reporting for *Wired* Samantha Subramanian (2017) found a town in Macedonia that was “the registered home of at least 100 pro-Trump websites, many of them filled with sensationalist, utterly fake news” (p. 70). The poster boy for this was a young man who goes by the pseudonym “Boris” for Subramanian’s article. Boris made money posting fake pro-Trump news stories, not because he cared about whether Trump won the election, but rather because he wanted the money from Google ads that clicks on his website would generate for him. A *New York Times* analysis similarly quoted one proprietor of a fake news, pro-Trump website as saying of his work, “this is all about income, nothing more” (Higgins, McIntire, and Dance, 2016, para. 29).

The question with this version of fake news and how to define it is one of motivation. If the source in Subramanian's reporting is to be believed, fake news is just a source of profit. There is no political motivation behind it. The purpose is to make click-bait in order to make money. Writing for the Shorenstein Center, Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) argue that the term fake news should be avoided altogether "for two reasons."

First, it is woefully inadequate to describe the complex phenomena of information pollution. The term has also begun to be appropriated by politicians around the world to describe news organisations whose coverage they find disagreeable. In this way, it's becoming a mechanism by which the powerful can clamp down upon, restrict, undermine and circumvent the free press. (para. 12)

Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) opt instead for information disorder. This is broken into three categories: misinformation, disinformation and malinformation. The first is false information without malicious intent. The second is false information used to cause harm. The third is true information used to cause harm. The concept of fake news could encompass all three.

Building on Wardle and Derakhshan, in defining the term fake news it would be useful to make a symbolic distinction, for the remainder of this paper, between fake news and Fake News. The capitalization in Fake News helps to differentiate between two ways of thinking about the words. On one hand, there is simply the existence of news stories that are false or fake. In those cases, it would be lower case fake news; just a false story. In our current political-media environment Fake News refers to something altogether different and more complex. Fake News is the intersection of longstanding propaganda techniques, dishonest political practices, espionage, capitalism, and emerging media technologies. More than just the publication of false information, Fake News is (1) the employment of complex propaganda techniques mixing true



and false information, (2) done both by political campaign operatives, outside operators, or activists, (3) with the intention of confusing, misleading, and playing on the existing biases of the public, (4) in order to achieve some political end.

Though some may accept this definition, the term took a bit of a “right turn,” so to speak, during a Donald Trump press conference shortly after the election. Then President-elect Trump was taking questions from the assembled reporters when he got into a verbal skirmish with CNN reporter Jim Acosta. Acosta shouted, “Since you are attacking our news organization ... can you give us a chance to ask a question, sir?” Trump replied, “your organization is terrible,” as he attempted to move on to a question from a Breitbart writer. Acosta persisted in his attempts to ask his question to which Trump finally replied, “you are fake news” and moved on. This incident from January 2017 was widely reported (Jamieson, 2017; Savransky, 2017b; Slack, 2017; Sutton, 2017). This was the point at which the term “fake news” shifted from referring to fabricated content used for partisan purposes to refer to, as one NPR article noted, a tool Trump used against “all unfavorable news coverage” (Kurtzleben, 2017, para. 4).

In April 2017 The Reporters’ Lab at Duke University’s Sanford School for Public Policy examined Trump’s use of “fake news,” looking through his tweets, speeches, interviews, and press conferences. Student researchers there found that 41% of the times he used the phrase he was referring to coverage of his campaign and administration’s alleged connections to Russia (Griffin, 2017, para. 3). The other uses of the terms were to “scold the press in general or to complain about its coverage of specific topics” (para. 4). This analysis reinforces the argument that Trump’s use of the term fake news was intended to shift its meaning away from those phony click bait stories described in Subramanian’s article, and definitely away from the political

propaganda of Fake News, to be used as a tool to delegitimize any and all criticism, especially from independent journalists, of his campaign and administration.

This attempt at delegitimizing the press had a coinciding, and particularly ugly and unsettling, variations from both Trump himself and some of his supporters. First, on February 17, 2017 President Trump tweeted from his personal account, “The FAKE NEWS media (failing @nytimes, @NBCNews, @ABC, @CBS, @CNN) is not my enemy, it is the enemy of the American People!” (Trump, 2017). The phrase “enemy of the American People” stood out for a lot of critics as being particularly problematic coming from an American president. *The New York Times* quoted Watergate reporter Carl Bernstein as saying this language “may be more insidious and dangerous than Richard Nixon’s attacks on the press” (Grynbaum, 2017, para. 9).

An equally frightening, although slightly less noticed trend, was when some Trump supporters, particularly those in white supremacist circles started using the term “Luggenpresse” to describe the American news media. Margaret Talbot (2016), writing for *The New Yorker* during the 2016 campaign, argued that “‘Dishonest’ and ‘lying’ are Trump’s go-to insults when talking about the press” (para. 12). However, Trump’s phrase is not quite as problematic as his supporters saying, “Luggenpresse,” a word that was popularized by the Nazis during Hitler’s rise to power and reign (Nesbit, 2016). This word, combined with a video featuring alt-right activists, with activist Richard Spencer in the lead, chanting, “Hail Trump! Hail our people! Hail victory!” as they collectively performed Nazi salutes (Lombroso and Applebaum, 2016).

The problem here, in addition to the obviously troubling allusions to the Nazis, is that, as Tom Rosenstiel (2016) argues for the Brookings Institution, there are currently some in American politics “who want to position a free press as the political opposition rather than a separate and independent fourth estate” (para. 5). On one hand, there are some who argue that

there might be a legal remedy to the problem of fake news (Feldman, 2016). On the other hand, there is a common argument that the solution to such speech is not a law banning it but rather more speech to correct and counteract it. This solution becomes a little more difficult when a small but significant and vocal minority in American political life, one of whom is sitting in the Oval Office, is not simply debating their opponents and attempting to present fact-based arguments to support criticism of their media coverage, but rather calling journalists liars and traitors.

## **II. Some Historical Examples of Fake News**

The examples of Fake News throughout history are almost too numerous to count. It is tempting, and would perhaps be more efficient, to simply make a list of bullet points rather than writing a paper about them. When confronting the sheer mass of mendacity that populates our past, it is easy to feel pessimistic. This is just the nature of politics, and that is an important point to remember. Fake News is predominantly a political problem more than it is a journalism problem. As the old saying goes, politics ain't bean bag.<sup>2</sup> For the most part, the problem for journalism is not dishonesty but rather a failure to spot and call out dishonesty, or just mistakes that are made in the process of seeking truth.

There are, of course, many exceptions to this argument. Perhaps the biggest is William Randolph Hearst's mission to drag the United States into the Spanish-American War with his infamous comment to his newspaper's illustrator Frederick Remington: "You furnish the pictures, I'll furnish the war." According to William Prochnau (2005) in the run-up to the war Hearst's newspaper started printing "stories so outrageous about atrocities so phony and appalling that the *New York Times* called them 'freak journalism'" (p. 313). Much of the press in

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<sup>2</sup> The saying "politics ain't beanbag" is said to have been first used in a newspaper column in 1895. It basically means that politics is an ugly business, not a game for children (Goddard, n.d.).

general are often credited with taking the U.S. unnecessarily into that war. David Traxel credits the news media as being an important part of the political pressure on President William McKinley to enter into the conflict in Cuba. All of this being broadly accepted historical fact, there is something perversely amusing about W. Joseph Campbell's (2017) argument that the anecdote about Hearst's quote being itself a myth. "There is a nearly complete absence of supporting documentation" for the story, Campbell argues (p. 10). Additionally, "Hearst denied ever sending the message" (p. 10). So, it appears it could be fake news about Fake News.

In the case of Hearst, and the tabloids of his time, even if the "furnish the pictures" anecdote is not true, it is true that those newspapers exaggerated the problems in Cuba and exacerbated public sentiment and helped push the United States into war (Traxel). This would meet the four-part definition of Fake News proposed in the first section of this paper: the mixture of true and false information, by some political being (in this case a newspaper editor), with the intention of confusing or misleading the public, for some political purpose (sending the nation to war). Having established that the news media can be political vessels, a discussion of the history of Fake News should focus more on how it is a product of more overt political operators.

This is to acknowledge a subtle distinction. Someone working in journalism can be a political being. The important historical concept of the watchdog press is a political function of the news media; this is the idea of journalism as the fourth estate, another check on governmental power. By contrast, activists, political operatives, and politicians are more overtly political. There is something fundamentally different, and probably more common, happening when they are sources of Fake News. In most cases the difference is that the news media are more likely to be functioning in purely ideological ways as opposed to the operatives who are more partisan than ideological, although the line between the two is often murky.

In her excellent critique of political culture, *Demagoguery and Democracy*, Patricia Roberts-Miller (2017) describes the circulation of false information in the antebellum south. She recounts a story of how pro-slavery advocates had claimed in 1835 that “the American Anti-Slavery Society had flooded the south with copies of a particular pamphlet (they hadn’t)” (p. 3). In Roberts-Miller’s telling, an English writer named Harriet Martineau had traveled the south and was repeatedly told this story of the pamphlet. However, even as she was told of the “flooding” she could not find a single person who had seen the pamphlet. The problem with the fact checking at the time, a problem that remains with us today, is the demagogic technique of bestowing credibility based upon the identity of the speaker rather than the facts. Coinciding with the identity of speakers clouding the public judgment is that era’s version of a filter bubble<sup>3</sup> where “pro-slavery rhetoric seemed to create a very strange world which its ideal consumers completely inhabited” (p. 90).

Sociologist J.A. Barnes (1994) says in his book *A Pack of Lies* that the “political arena is second only to warfare as a domain where lies are expected, do in fact occur, and are to a substantial extent tolerated” (p. 30). It would make sense that the intersection of politics, war, and media would be fertile ground for Fake News throughout history. For example, during World War I there were stories that German soldiers would toss Belgian babies into the air and catch them on their bayonets. On the other side, the German press reported that French soldiers would “routinely gouge out the eyes of captured German soldiers” (Singh, 2006, p. 152). Neither story was true.

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<sup>3</sup> The term filter bubble refers to the ways in which media environments feed back to us information that reinforces our already established beliefs (Pariser, 2011).

After returning home from World War I journalist George Seldes found that, just as government had used Fake News to get the public on board with going to war, they had used it to maintain public support. Seldes (1935) later wrote:

The journals back home that printed our stories boasted that their correspondents had been at the fighting front. I now realize that we were told nothing but buncombe, that we were shown nothing of the realities of the war, that we were, in short, merely part of the Allied propaganda machine whose purpose was to sustain morale at all costs and help drag unwilling America into the slaughter. ... We all more or less lied about the war. (pp. 34-35)

Fordham University professor Robin Andersen (2006) says that soldiers in the trenches “began to chafe at the ‘jauntiness of tone’ of reporting that often implied that a battle was a ‘jovial picnic’ (p. 14). Andersen also notes that, much like his American counterpart in Seldes, British reporter Philip Gibbs would go on to “express regret for his role in misrepresenting the war at the time” (p. 15). Gibbs (1920) wrote a book, *Now it Can Be Told*, which would explain the misrepresentations in Allied propaganda.

It is likely that Fake News always has and always will be part of wartime propaganda techniques. There is a bizarre and unsettling common theme around atrocities committed against babies as part of the justification for wars. In 1990 as part of the U.S. Senate’s decision-making process about whether to go to war against Iraq a young girl testified that, when invading Kuwait, Iraqi soldiers entered hospitals and were taking premature babies out of their incubators and dropping them on the hospital floor, leaving them there to die (Marano, 2002). The false senate testimony came from a girl identified only “Nayirah” who was later discovered to be the daughter of the Kuwaiti ambassador to the U.S. (*New York Times*, 1992, para. 3). It was also

discovered that the story had been fabricated by a British PR firm called Hill & Knowlton. More Fake News to justify a war.

Fake News also has a long history of usefulness in the non-violent warfare of politics. James Callender is likely one of the first practitioners of this dark art in American political history. He is also a perfect mixture of the functions of a political operative/propagandist and journalist in one person. Journalist and host of *Face the Nation* John Dickerson (2016) recounts the tale of Callender as a well-known fabricator and scandalmonger. Callender spread false rumors about John Adams and Alexander Hamilton in the service of Thomas Jefferson's political goals.

In Dickerson's retelling then Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson had given financial support to Callender's libels and scandalmongering yet, when confronted, denied to President George Washington that he had any connection to Callender. In a perfect mixture of true information and false implications, essential to the definition of Fake News, Callender reported on a story of Hamilton trading money for sex with a woman whose husband had abandoned her and her children. Hamilton contended that his only crime was "an amorous connection" with the woman.

Callender's most infamous hit job, right behind his attacks on Alexander Hamilton, are those he directed toward John Adams. One Callender essay referred to Adams as a "hideous hermaphroditical character which has neither the force or firmness of a man, nor the gentleness and sensibility of a woman" (Eagan, 2012, p. 803). This, along with other attacks, came with the anonymous financial support of Jefferson. Callender's writing ended up landing him in a Richmond jail cell. Luckily for him Jefferson was elected to the presidency in 1800 and Callender was released (Jellison, 1959).

Of course, the Fake News of the 1800 campaign was not a one-sided affair. Jefferson was the target of false and malicious attacks from Federalists newspapers. Charles Lerche (1948) tells the story of the Mazzei Letter, a tale for which we could easily think of many modern analogs. The Mazzei Letter, which Jefferson wrote to the Italian philosopher Philip Mazzei, contained criticisms of the Federalists that were twisted during the campaign to imply that Jefferson possessed an anti-British and pro-French bias and were misconstrued to imply being an insult against George Washington. The best Fake News of 1800, though, is probably the rumor that Jefferson had died in July in the middle of the campaign. What had actually happened was a slave at Monticello, who had the same name as his master, had passed away. Federalist newspapers repeated the falsehood until proof that Jefferson was still alive was published (Lerche, p. 489).

But the worst attack was yet to come for Jefferson. Dickerson best describes the events that would follow in the title of a chapter of his book, *Whistlestop*: “keep your attack dog fed.” As Dickerson tells it, James Callender expected a job from his patron, the new president, after running Jefferson’s smear campaigns for him (not to mention serving jail time). The job would never come. Callender would later turn on Jefferson and is probably best known for spreading a rumor, which we now know to be true: that Jefferson had fathered children with one of his slaves, Sally Hemmings.

The use of Fake News evolved after Callender’s time, over centuries of American politics, with new forms of media. During World War II the Allies used Fake News radio broadcasts that contained information intended to lower the morale of Nazi troops (Shaer, 2017). Domestically in American politics the creation of Fake News continued with practitioners such as Walter Quigley. In his analysis of the law and political campaign deception, Jack Winsbro



(1987) says, “Almost forgotten now, Quigley was much feared in his day for his hard-hitting political advertising” (p. 855).

That fear was well founded. Quigley was responsible for what he called “dynamiting” newspapers, the ultimate example of Fake News. In the early to mid 1900s Quigley would circulate this campaign literature, which was disguised as mock newspapers with the masthead *United States Senate News*, containing fake information about his candidate’s political opponents (Jonas, 1957). Quigley firmly believed that a successful campaign required “heat.” In other words, the voters are less interested in positive, affirmative information about their favored candidate and more interested in negative information about the opponent.

One of Quigley’s losing candidates, Joseph Ball, requested that his 1948 U.S. Senate campaign be kept positive. He ended up losing that campaign to Hubert Humphrey. He would later write in a letter that Quigley went positive for him but did so unhappily. Having lost the race Ball lamented, “people still prefer to vote against rather than for” (Jonas, 1957, p. 383). This comment could easily be describing the 2016 presidential campaign. For example, one Pew study found that 53% of Trump voters said they were voted more against Clinton than for Trump. This is compared to 2008 when McCain voters were 35% against Obama, 59% for McCain. On the other side Clinton voters were 46% against Trump, 53% for Clinton, compared to 2008 Obama voters who were 25% against McCain, 68% for Obama (Geiger, 2016).

### **Looking for the Upside**

One upside to the history of Fake News, that could create hope for the present and future of journalism, is the pendulum swing in response to the phenomenon. In his *Politico* article Jacob Soll (2016) recounts the story of Jean Calas, “a respected Protestant merchant,” who in 1761 was tortured and executed because of a false story that he had killed his son because the

young man wanted to convert to Catholicism. This led to Voltaire and others fighting back against such false and malicious stories and the incident, Soll argues, “became a touchstone for the Enlightenment itself” (para. 8). Similarly, Soll argues that the yellow journalism of the 1800s, with its sensationalism and false stories, “caused a backlash, and sent the public in search of more objective news” (para. 13).

Soll’s characterization of this backlash against yellow journalism is supported by Burton and Shea (2010) who argue that journalism turned away from sensationalism and “reinforced the idea that ‘objectivity’ should be the guiding principle” for the field (p. 179). Progressives also celebrated the shift toward muckraking journalism directed toward exposing corruption in government and corporations as opposed to simply selling salacious stories. Jean Lutes (2012) writing in *The Oxford History of Popular Print Culture* similarly argues that the backlash “intensified in the first decade of the twentieth century” and a “more restrained, information-based approach [to journalism] emerged as the winning model” (pp. 102-103).

This might lead an optimist to think contemporary journalism is on the verge of similar backlash. Given the level of sensationalism and fabricated news stories, which invade journalism from political operatives and PR machines more than being a product of it, it is easy to hope that the field of journalism and the public will start crying out for, and get, a “more restrained, information-based approach” to their news. As the next section of this paper will demonstrate, holding one’s breath for such a change might be a bad idea.

### **III. What the future holds**

The future of Fake News is a scary one because we are on the verge of a world where seeing *really isn’t* believing. Not even close. As we have learned from so many examples, media have the power to manipulate perceptions of reality and to even fabricate it. However, the reality

creation into which we could potentially be entering is frightening. Rob Price (2017), writing for *Business Insider*, summed up the problem succinctly, and perfectly:

CGI and artificial intelligence are developing at a rapid pace, and in the coming years it will become increasingly easy for hoaxsters and propagandists to create fake audio and video — creating the potential for unprecedented doubt over the authenticity of visual media. (para. 9)

There is a level of paranoia that comes along with this vision of the future. This cannot be denied, especially as Price quotes one person responding to the conspiracy theory that Julian Assange had disappeared, saying:

I plan on watching the interview totally sober, and then vaping a whole bunch of weed and re-watching. I find that I can spot CGI or irregularities incredibly easily when I am really high. (para. 6)

It is fairly easy to discount concerns about faked videos as the ramblings of paranoiacs or weed vaping weirdos on Reddit. However, when you see the potential technology for the coming years it becomes more difficult to ignore them.

For example, earlier this year a group of five researchers published a paper outlining facial reenactment software they developed. This technique has been used for capturing an actor's performance and translating it into a CG character in an animated movie or video game. These researchers have taken that process to the next level by demonstrating the ability to capture an actor's performance and apply it to an existing piece of video of a real person, "in a photo-realistic fashion, such that it is virtually impossible to notice the manipulations" (Thies, et al., 2017, p. 1).

Another program that Adobe is developing would allow the producer of a video to create the illusion that an actor said something by simply typing the words. This software, Adobe VoCo, is problematic because, with just 20 minutes worth of audio of someone's voice it gives a producer the ability to generate fake audio of that person saying something they never said. The BBC reported that Adobe did a demo of the software in which they edited the voice of comedian Keegan-Michael Key to make him say that he kissed his comedy partner Jordan Peele three times. The BBC (2016) reported that the "edit took seconds and simply involved the operator overtyping a transcript of the speech and then pressing a button to create the synthesised voice track" (para. 6).

A number of media outlets have reported on this development in a way that raises serious concerns for the future of journalism and the development of even more sophisticated Fake News and propaganda. Writing for the science news website *Seeker*, Dave Roos (2017) argues:

While both of these technologies have legitimate applications, they also present incredible opportunities for abuse. With nothing more than a webcam, YouTube and this next-generation motion capture and audio editing software, a future fake news producer could publish convincingly real video clips of world leaders making any statement - or threat - simply by speaking or typing. (para. 9)

Roos quotes Pablo Boczkowski, a professor of communication at Northwestern University who studies media and technology. "There's always been misinformation," Boczkowski says. "What we have now is an information infrastructure that is very different, with a scale and a scope that we haven't seen before" (Roos, para. 4).

The rapid technological advances that are improving the ability for manipulation are ubiquitous in the contemporary media environment. Increasingly powerful video and audio

manipulation software are only two examples of this. Of course, manipulation is in a way inherent to editing. The late NPR journalist John Solomon did an amazing piece of reporting for the program *On the Media* (2007) ten years ago about his concerns about the ethics of the simple edits that are done to take out every pause, stutter, and “um” in an interviewee’s responses. That being said, the manipulation in those simple edits is amped up to a completely new degree with Adobe Voco and the Face2Face facial capture software.

The other concern about the future of Fake News is the ubiquity of social media as delivery devices for the content. Again, these programs have been with us for some time now but their presence in our lives is increasing, with more people using the platforms and more people using mobile technologies where the platforms are found. Thus, the necessary infrastructure for the rapid dissemination of false information is more present in our lives than ever.

The program BBC Future asked experts what they thought were the greatest concerns for this changing technological environment and “many named the breakdown of trusted sources of information as one of the most pressing problems today” (Gray, 2017, para. 4). Richard Gray cites experts in highlighting three major problems for the future of news in the present, and future, technological environment. First, there is the problem of misinformation for continuing a society of self-governance. In a fundamental way, an informed electorate is essential to a free society. Stephan Lewandowsky, a cognitive scientist at the University of Bristol in the UK, argues that “Having a large number of people in a society who are misinformed and have their own set of facts is absolutely devastating and extremely difficult to cope with” (para. 7).

A second problem, which intersects the importance of being informed with the nature of social media, is that it becomes difficult to maintain expertise as the basis of decision making in a society. Gray cites Kevin Kelly, “a technology author and co-founder of Wired magazine,”

who argues that truth “is no longer dictated by authorities, but is networked by peers” (para. 16). Riding in tandem with the breakdown of authority and expertise is a third problem, where social media make it possible for formally isolated fringe, and in some cases dangerous, ideas to be cultivated. Will Moy, director of Full Fact, a fact-checker in the UK, argues that social media have made it possible for people to find others who share their worldview. This is especially problematic because, for example, it becomes easier for hate groups to organize, become activated, disseminate their troubling messages, spread false information, and recruit others into their groups. Moy argues, “In the past it was harder for relatively fringe opinions to get their views reinforced. If we were chatting around the kitchen table or in the pub, often there would be a debate” (Gray, para. 18). Social media change the nature of that debate and often not for the better.

All of these things pose a threat to a free society, democratic deliberation, and journalism as an institution. One of the challenges of formulating a solution to these problems is that the law is very little help. In an attempt to protect a free society from propaganda and deception, using the law as a tool potentially threatens the very freedom that is supposed to be protected. Writing for the *University of Cincinnati Law Review's* website Melanie Navamanikkam addresses this issue as it relates to similar visual manipulations in the use of Adobe Photoshop in advertising.

Any law regulating deceptive practices via digital technology is going to be subject to strong First Amendment scrutiny. Even though the Supreme Court has ruled “commercial speech that is false or misleading receives no [First Amendment] protection” (Navamanikkam, 2017, para. 6). Navamanikkam argues that any regulation of this sort should be narrowly restricted to “beauty advertisements that are digitally altered to project a magnified version of whatever the product purports to do” (para. 15).

The problem for regulating the digital manipulation of political messages is that political speech receives a higher level of protection than commercial speech. This opens up a great deal of latitude for malicious behavior on the part of political activists, campaign operatives, candidates, and even international operators such as youngsters in Macedonia just out to make a buck and ex-KGB agents out to manipulate an election. However, some would argue that such potential manipulations are the price we pay for freedom of speech.

This position has been articulated numerous times over the course of centuries. One of the oldest versions of this argument is Thomas Jefferson's statement, "I would rather be exposed to the inconveniences attending too much liberty than to those attending too small a degree of it" (Jefferson, 1791). More recently, in his argument against regulating Fake News, Cathal Sheerin (2017) argues that "we must accept that lies and fabricated or inaccurate stories are the inevitable price that we have to pay to be able to enjoy our right to communicate freely" (p. 35). That being said, the future of communicating freely has the potential to be a scary one.

## **V. Conclusion: The political attack on journalism**

In his book *Don't Shoot the Messenger* Bruce Sanford describes a court case in which an unappealing young man sued a Kentucky newspaper, claiming it had libeled him. The newspaper had described a fight between the young man and a schoolmate as a "savagely beating." The problem for the newspaper was the accuracy of that description since the fight involved one punch from the first young man, followed by the second hitting his head on the pavement. The second young man fell into a "fatal coma" and died a year later (Sanford, 1999, pp. 11-12). The newspaper reporting left readers with the impression that the first young man's punch was a direct cause of the second young man's death. As Sanford tells it, the young plaintiff "hardly made an apple-cheeked impression; he was so disagreeable that he made you wish the dead boy

had gotten in a few licks before eating concrete” (p. 12). Despite the awful manner in which he apparently comported himself in court during his defamation lawsuit against the newspaper, the jury sided with him. When asked why, one juror said, “Well, we didn’t much like that little shithead, but we liked the newspaper even less” (p. 12).

The results stand in stark contrast to what happened in the John Peter Zenger<sup>4</sup> case of 1733. Jury nullification protected Zenger from prosecution by the royal governor of the colony of New York. The Kentucky newspaper was not so lucky. More important, in the Kentucky case that newspaper, not the government, was public enemy No. 1. This seems to be the case for many Americans in their perceptions of the news media. The press-public relationship is in a state of what Cappella and Jamieson (1997) call the “spiral of cynicism.” This is the idea that politicians and the press feed public cynicism through strategy frames in news reporting and politicians’ focus on strategy over substantive policy discussions.

Journalists feed this spiral of cynicism, Cappella and Jamieson argue, through their perceptions that their focus on strategy frames is “offering the public what it wants” (p. 238), “horse race” coverage rather than policy debates. This connects to another problem in the news media, the way in which the news is treated like a business rather than a public service that should probably be a loss leader in media corporations rather than a potential source of profit. It is essential to question whether, in this atmosphere where news is expected to be profitable above all else, it will be possible to produce the best political discourse, determine truth, and identify the deceptive political practices that produce Fake News.

Adding to the problem is the public’s declining faith in the news media. Even if American journalism were the epitome of truth and virtue, public trust in the media is so low that

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<sup>4</sup> Zenger was a 16<sup>th</sup> century printer who was charged with seditious libel for printing a newspaper that was critical of the royal governor of the colony of New York. While Zenger was guilty of seditious libel the jury found him not guilty, engaging in jury nullification, because the criticism was true (Lewis, 2008, pp. 4-5).



it echoes Thomas Jefferson's sentiment about the newspapers of his time when he said, "Truth itself becomes suspicious by being put into that polluted vehicle" (Jefferson, 1807, para. 4). A Gallup poll from September 2016 found public opinion of the news media was at its lowest with "32% saying they have a great deal or fair amount of trust in the media" (Swift, 2016, para. 1). A few months later, in May 2017, a Harvard-Harris poll found that 65% of respondents "believe there is a lot of fake news in the mainstream media" (Easley, 2017, para. 2). These are just two polls that reinforce a great deal of media discourse around this declining public trust.

Exacerbating this problem is the partisan divide in news media sources to which the public most commonly turns. For example, the Harvard-Harris poll found that 80% of Republicans believe there is a lot of fake news. This is in comparison to 60% of independents and 53% of Democrats (Easley, para. 3). The partisan divide extends beyond perceptions of content to the role the news media play in society. A May 2017 Pew study found that 89% of Democrats feel the news media perform their role as a watchdog on political leadership while only 42% of Republican respondents felt that way (Barthel and Mitchell, 2017, para. 2). The same study found a wide partisan gap in other areas. For example, 87% of Republicans feel the media tend to favor one side in political debates with 53% of Democrats agreeing. The most depressing numbers from this study for the news media should be that only 34% of Democrats feel information from the national news media is "very trustworthy," and 11% of Republicans feel the same.

This partisan divide is also reflected in the sources to which people turn for information. A 2014 Pew study found people who were consistent liberals were spread almost equally across found major news sources: CNN, MSNBC, National Public Radio, and *The New York Times*. By contrast, 47% of consistent conservatives reported Fox News as their main news source

(Mitchell, et al., 2014). This reinforces findings from Iyengar and Hahn (2009) and Peterson, Goel, and Iyengar (2017). The latter of those two studies argues that the partisan divide during the 2016 presidential election was bad because of the perception of partisans, especially Republicans, “that non-partisan news outlets are biased against them” (p. 1).

A lack of public trust in the news media is definitely not a product of the 2016 campaign. If Pew or Quinnipiac polling existed during the 1800 presidential campaign they probably would have found Jefferson’s supporters complaining about those nasty Federalist newspapers that were spreading malicious lies about their candidate and the Federalist voters grumbling about the dishonesty of the Democratic-Republican papers. It is easy to imagine a strange, early-American analog to the battles between MSNBC and Fox News.

Despite the long-existing problems of factionalism in media, a good case can be made for the argument that much of the cultural, political, media wars we find in contemporary American political culture are rooted in the politics of Richard Nixon and the campaign of 1968 (Perlstein, 2008). This divisiveness is in part a product of what was known as the southern strategy. Joseph Aistrup (1996) defines this as a decade’s long evolution in the political and cultural rhetoric of the Republican Party that appealed to “strongly ideological, racially motivated, white conservatives” and employed a discourse about “states rights” in an attempt to obscure<sup>5</sup> its exploitation of racial animosity (p. 5).

The key component of this political strategy is to play, sometimes subtly and sometimes overtly, on racial and social resentments. The news media are an important part of that. This is how the term “mainstream media” came to be a derogatory one. Politicians, mostly of the

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<sup>5</sup> Probably the most infamous explanation of the southern strategy came from Republican political consultant Lee Atwater who explained that over the decades starting in the 1950s, political rhetoric evolved from overt racism, even using racial slurs, to the more abstract racism of “states’ rights.” Atwater said in a recorded interview, “all these things you’re talking about are totally economic things and a byproduct of them is, blacks get hurt worse than whites” (Perlstein, 2012, para. 2).

conservative persuasion, have sewed distrust of the media as an explicit political strategy.

Writing for *Salon*, Matt Grossman (2017) says that conservatives have been skeptical of the news media at least since the Goldwater era and argues that Trump's use of the term "fake news" is just "a more extreme version of a long-standing complaint" (para. 3).

Martin Nolan (2005) makes a good case that Richard Nixon's presidency is an important moment in the evolution of conservative attitudes toward the news media. Nolan argues that Nixon, perhaps unwittingly, deployed George Orwell's idea about "the special connection between politics and the debasement of language" (p. 71). The way in which Nixon did this was to "disarm his critics by changing 'the press' into 'the media' (p. 72). Nixon, Nolan argues, "sought a phrase that would yoke the sage and sober Walter Lippmann to the most loutish talk show host" (p. 78).

Nixon's goal of turning "sage and sober" reporters into "loutish talk show hosts" seemed to come to fruition with George H.W. Bush's 1988 presidential campaign. In his book *Attack the Messenger*, Craig Crawford recounts CBS reporter Dan Rather's interview with the Republican presidential candidate in January of 1988. Then-Vice President Bush was facing questions about his role in the Iran/Contra scandal.<sup>6</sup> When the CBS reporter came to that topic, the now infamous interview "disassembled into a verbal shoving match" (Crawford, p. 9). The story then became about the clash between the candidate and the reporter, not about the vice president's conduct in

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<sup>6</sup> The Iran/Contra affair was one of the more complex scandals in modern American politics. *The Washington Post* (n.d.) presents a simplified version of the events in which the Reagan Administration sold weapons to the Iranian government to aid their war against Iraq. In exchange for the arms sales, which were illegal, "Iran was to use its influence to help gain the release of Americans held hostage in Lebanon" (para. 1). Finally, the weapons were sold to Iran at inflated prices and the excess money was to be sent to "the Reagan-favored 'contras' fighting the Sandinista government in Nicaragua" (para. 1). In addition to the illegality of selling weapons to Iran this process violated the U.S. policy of not negotiating for hostages and it circumvented Congressional limits on the funding of the contras in Nicaragua. There were questions about how much President Reagan and Vice President Bush knew about the plan. While neither Reagan nor Bush were punished, members of the Reagan Administration, including National Security Adviser John Poindexter and Oliver North, did face charges (para. 4). Rather was questioning Bush about his role in the affair. The independent counsel in the investigation, Lawrence Walsh (1997), later published a detailed description of the scandal.

office. In engaging in the conflict, and focusing public attention on the conduct of the press, Bush had “turned the tables” and “pulled the pedestal away” from the news media, as Crawford says, especially the evening news anchors (p. 11). This was the beginning of the undoing of the credibility historically associated with Walter Cronkite and replacing it with the assumption of liberal bias and “gotcha” journalism associated with Rather.

Crawford argues, “since the Bush-Rather meltdown, the vilification of the news media by politicians [has] diminished the power of an independent press” (p. 11). More than a desire for fair treatment from reporters, this strategy on the part of politicians is a returning of fire in the adversarial relationship. On the Bush/Rather conflict over Iran/Contra, “Bush challenged Rather in a way that undermined the role of a journalist to ... ask the questions those leaders prefer not answer.” What made this especially problematic is that “once the dust settled on this incident, the American people still had no meaningful answers from a politician who did have some explaining to do” (Crawford, p. 12). Nolan argues that Nixon treated the “media” as an enemy, the Bush campaign imitated this approach using press antagonism to avoid difficult questions in 1988 and continued using reporters as foils in 1992 with campaign bumper stickers that read, “annoy the media, re-elect Bush.”

This discourse about media bias from the conservative perspective has continued through the decades into the last few presidential elections. During the 2012 campaign between incumbent President Barack Obama and his challenger, former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney the critique expanded from the traditional reporters to fact checking organizations that supplement them. While the fact checkers presented themselves as independent observers, referring to themselves as “non-partisan”<sup>7</sup> organizations that “help you find the truth in

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<sup>7</sup> This is from Fact Check.org’s “Our Mission” page on their website (FactCheck.org, n.d.).

politics,”<sup>8</sup> there was still a desire to push back against this in a general sense and against specific fact checks those organizations made in a general sense and against specific fact checks those organizations made. This is best exemplified by Romney campaign pollster Neil Newhouse, who said, “Fact checkers come to this with their own sets of thoughts and beliefs, and we’re not going to let our campaign be dictated by fact checkers” (Smith, 2012, para. 5). This was said in response to questions, during a panel discussion, about the veracity of a Romney campaign ad about the Obama Administration’s changes in welfare policy.

The attacks on the independence and factuality of reporting in the news media are part of a political strategy to undermine the watchdog role of the news media. The notion of journalism as the Fourth Estate is an historically important one. Powerful institutions, including the government and corporations, need to be critiqued. When they abuse their power, it is the job of the reporter to make the public aware of it. The decades of accusations of media bias have worked to undermine the public faith in that and that has been detrimental to the institution of journalism but more so to the public.

When a politician hurls the term “fake news” at every story he doesn’t like he is taking that “media bias” accusation and amping it up one more step. Calling reporters biased implies that their perceptions are distorted by their beliefs. However, it leaves open the possibility that they genuinely believe what they are saying is true. Everyone is potentially biased but that does not make them inherently dishonest. Calling something “fake news” turns the reporter into a liar, someone who is actively generating false stories for nefarious purposes. It echoes Nixon’s strategy in shifting from “press” to “media,” which Nolan argues, “was just such a grand Latinism, an apt word for those seeking to create a grand conspiracy” (p. 78). This is the gravest threat of Trump’s use of the term. It intensifies the already problematic political discourse aimed

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<sup>8</sup> This is from PolitiFact’s “About PolitiFact” page on their website (PolitiFact, n.d.).

at undermining journalism's role in democratic deliberation; it is propaganda designed to prevent critical thinking about propaganda. If there will be one truly important task for journalism during and after the Trump era it will be working to push back against, and undo, this cynical political strategy.

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