

Towards a political economy of fake news

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Many PhDs will be written examining the explosion of public and scholarly interest in the topic of ‘fake news’, but at the end of 2017 the academic literature is still relatively thin.

The Collins Dictionary has declared fake news to be its word of the year for 2017, noting that it has become “ubiquitous” in political discourse after being popularised by Donald Trump (Flood, 2017). Studies are also now broaching the topic, with varying amounts of clarity and success. This commentary is not a definitive review of the current literature, it is an exploratory foray into how and why the political economy of communication lens should be brought to bear on the topic.

While the phenomenon is not new, interest in fake news has certainly spiked since the election of Donald J Trump as 45th President of the United States. Prior to Trump’s election the category of fake news was limited to explorations of landmark incidents such as the so-called WMD dossier that precipitated the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and to our understanding of satirical publications like *The Onion*, or to the work of comedic broadcasters such as Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert (Hirst, 2011). These perspectives on fake news are no longer adequate, though they form an important backdrop to current debates.

Fake news should be a serious topic in the political economy of communication because it brings into sharp relief a critical analysis of the news industry and of journalism from a Marxist perspective. I am not, at this point, offering a cure, 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 the Fourth Estate paradigm does not hold the answers. Rather, I assert here that the ideological paradigm in which the Fourth Estate operates makes it 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.

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 freak show of the Trump presidency. There is no doubt that fake news is at the heart of a profoundly political debate, centred in the United States, but with echoes across Europe following the Brexit negotiations and the French election of 2017. President Donald Trump has weaponised the term as a noun – with echoes of the Nazi slogan the ‘lying press’ – to attack media outlets that he does not like. More broadly, the fake news debate is about who gets to define ‘truth’, in regard to the

role of journalists and journalism in liberal democracies (McNair, 2018). 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 claim that many of the anti-Macron and pro-Fillon false stories were being promoted by the Sputnik and Russia Today news services (Gilbert, 2017). The moral panic about Russian interference in Western nations also fuelled the 'Brexit' debate in the UK. Allegedly, so-called Russian propaganda was circulated in favour of a 'leave' position (Grice, 2017). Furthermore, 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 campaign (Week, 2017).

While it is tempting to take allegations of Russian interference at face value, it is important to step back and ask why Putin and Russia would be the target of such claims. To some degree, the media and political operatives are falling back onto an old Cold War trope. 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 to regard this as the only manifestation of fake news. We should be particularly cautious when one of the political figures promoting such a viewpoint 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 (2017) has pointed out in *The Intercept*, there is also plenty of fake news around that overstates possible Russian interference in the US Presidential election.

A political economy inquiry into fake news can begin with an analysis of contemporary American, British and French events, but it cannot end there. Our approach must examine the category of fake news dispassionately, historically and critically.

Trump's appropriation of 'fake news'

Since the now infamous squabble about the size of the crowds attending his January 2017 inauguration (Robertson and Farley, 2017), the President, Donald Trump, has deployed fake news as a collective noun to deride news stories and outlets he does not like. This extends to any news that does not accord with his narrative of achievement and fabulousness. His attacks on the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times* and the CNN network have led some White House correspondents to boycott the annual presidential Christmas meet-and-greet. The fact that a prominent black journalist and a gay reporter were pointedly not invited also signalled that Trump's feud with the news media is likely to continue (Shugerman, Black and LGBT reporters respond after being left off White House Christmas party guest list for the first time in years, 2017).

As of the time writing, the political crisis swirling around an embattled President continues to be fuelled by his almost daily references to fake news. Inside the Trump bubble fake news means any of the mainstream media reporting of his presidency that he does not like. It began with the newly-installed POTUS taking issue with media coverage of his inauguration; especially in regard to crowd estimates. Within weeks, the 'fake news' narrative from the White House was being applied to any criticism of the President, the White House and Trump-appointed officials.

In 2017 alone, between 10 January and 2 November, Trump had called the mainstream media a source of fake news 146 times on Twitter and dozens of times in speeches. He made repeated attacks on the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and most of the major TV networks by name. He insulted and mocked individual journalists, often accusing them directly of concocting fake news

stories with anonymous sources. On the other hand, he praised Fox News and retweeted stories from the network constantly.

There is a lot to be said and more research to be conducted on the broader effects of Trump's war with the American news media across the public sphere. However, there is not much doubt about his motivations. On one side Trump is appealing to his shrinking base among American voters; there seems to be a hard core of about 30 per cent who will support him no matter what. Trump's comments feed into their anger and distrust of the 'elite' Washington media and they reinforce his (fake) outsider status as a new type of political leader who has promised to 'drain the swamp'. His angry, and sometimes violent rhetoric towards the media deflects attention from the simple fact that Trump has not kept his promises and that his policies, if enacted are likely to harm, not help his base. And, he knows he cannot win votes among more liberally-minded groups, so his propaganda is designed to reflect the views of conservative supporters (Rosen, 2017).

In a bizarre, Orwellian twist, Trump made the outlandish claim that he invented the term 'fake news'. He said, during a softball interview on a Christian television network, that "the media is really, the word, one of the greatest of all terms I've come up with, is 'fake'" (Cillizza, 2017). The parallels with 'newspeak' and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four* are not without merit. Comments implying that Trump – like Big Brother – is always right are frequently heard from his surrogates.

White House counsel Kellie Ann Conway invoked the idea of 'alternative facts' when called on to defend claims that the January 2017 inauguration crowd had been perhaps the largest ever when it clearly was not (Fandos, 2017). While the comment outraged most serious observers, it only strengthened the belief, among Trump supporters, that the Washington media elite was conspiring against him. In late November 2017, President Trump presented a textbook example of weaponising fake news when he retweeted anti-Muslim stories promoted by a British fascist outfit known as Britain First. The content of the viral tweets is contested and most likely the videos do not actually contain what is claimed. Trump retweeted three times material from Britain First and then his spokesperson, Sarah Huckabee Sanders, defended him by arguing that it didn't matter if the videos were fake.

'Whether it's a real video, the threat is real,' Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders told reporters. 'His goal is to promote strong border security and strong national security.' 'I'm not talking about the nature of the video,' she said. '..The threat is real, what the President is talking about – the need for national security and military spending – those are very real things, there's nothing fake about that (Shugerman, White House defends Trump and says it doesn't matter if video he retweeted was fake: 'The threat is real', 2017).

Such comments might be astonishing to some, but they go largely unchallenged and certainly appear to energise Trump's base. While Trump and his media surrogates attempt to frame their own take on the phenomenon and concept of fake news, analysts and commentators are now beginning to address the underlying motivations.

A war on reality?

Why would Donald Trump spend so many of his waking hours tweeting and talking about fake news? His obsession may be one of many psychological weaknesses and a sign of psychiatric disorder, but it does serve a logical purpose for the Trump White House. Through endless accusations that the media is lying and distorting things to attack him, Trump is able to achieve two objectives. The first

is to simply persuade rusted-on supporters that he is the victim of a media-led conspiracy. The second is to muddy the waters so that it is almost impossible for the media to keep track of his own lies. Analysis by the *Washington Post* and other media outlets confirmed that between his inauguration in January and the 18th of November 2017, Trump had made verifiably false statements more than 1600 times. It is obvious that Trump's lies are mostly calculated – he may or may not believe them himself – but, as suggested in *Salon*: “Now he's using lies to keep himself from being removed from office” (Truscott, 2017).

As noted, the White House has tried to control the ‘fake news’ narrative to mobilise Trump's base against the political forces he believes are trying to derail his presidency. According to this version of events, the President is under attack from media and political elites who are discomfited by White House efforts to ‘drain the swamp’. This is a crude technique of propaganda that appeared to work for Trump in the first months of his presidency; although it has perhaps lost its shine since then.

The constant criticism of journalists and news outlets by Trump and his surrogates suggests that the President is moving American political discourse away from the bedrock of factual truth toward a semi-Fascist epistemology from which truth is what the President says it is and facts do not matter. Trump's disconnect from reality has become so noticeable that the debate has become wider than the state of the President's mental health. As *New York Times* columnist Michelle Goldberg noted in an early December, op-ed: “He might be delusional, or he might simply be asserting the power to blithely override truth, which is the ultimate privilege of a despot” (Goldberg, 2017).

Writing in *Salon*, executive editor Andrew O'Hehir (2017), argues that “reality is losing” under Trump's endless assaults. Like many other serious and thoughtful commentators, O'Hehir believes – and it is hard to disagree – that Trump's “assault on democracy goes hand-in-glove with his assault on truth”. There is real danger here. If truth becomes notional and contingent, it becomes harder to resist the anti-democratic agenda that Trump is pursuing.

There are two possible and mutually exclusive propositions in play here: either, Trump is delusional, or he is playing a strategic long game of disinformation and chaos to entrench himself in the White House. In the latter context, there are even suggestions that he has adopted the Putinesque strategy of *dramaturgia* – the staging of deliberate provocations to destabilise politics in order to take advantage of the resultant confusion.

What if all the Trumpian chaos that the ‘mainstream media’ have come to take for granted as pugilism and vanity was part of a more cunning plan? ... While Trump may not have state-controlled media at his disposal, as Putin does, to serve as 24-7 propaganda organs both domestically and abroad, his team is finding ways to shrewdly approximate Putin's capacity to shape narratives and create alternative realities (Mariani, 2017).

This analysis takes as its start point the Russian interference meme and builds on Trump's alleged deep ties to Putin and the Kremlin. While there is evidence of collusion between the Trump camp and Russian agents during the campaign, there is no definitive proof that Trump himself is actively cooperating with Putin. It is important that critical progressives don't get sucked into the conspiracy theories because they are, in themselves disarming.

To define fake news as only a Trump-related issue, or as a conspiracy to spread Russian influence in the West, does not provide a lens for examining the broader issue of truth and meaning in the public sphere. Political economy needs a broader understanding of fake news that moves beyond the normative belief in objective Fourth Estate journalism as practiced in liberal-democracies. We need

to challenge the idea that news in general can be taken as an objective approximation of reality, without any overt or embedded bias. Critical political-economy researchers need to advance the understanding that most categories of news – particularly about politics, economics and controversial social issues (such as the Black Lives Matter movement) – are embedded with ideology that may be either deliberate and explicit, or implicit and a form of unconscious bias. The Fourth Estate view – founded on outmoded concepts of objectivity – is ideological because it assumes that the current socio-economic system is unassailable and represents the best that we can expect. If we allow this view to stand, the legitimacy of institutional forms of liberal-democratic journalism, with all of its in-built biases against progressive politics and workers' struggle, is enhanced by default.

Fake news and commodity journalism

From a critical political economy perspective, the theme of 'fake news' has a long and political history that is dialectically bound to the commodity form of journalism in a capitalist market economy. There is also a need to counter a normative, yet highly ideological, media markets model in which fake news is theorised 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).

In the eyes of his supporters at least, Trump has successfully appropriated a term that was first applied to those erroneous news stories mostly supportive of his campaign, that were spread widely on social media (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; that it spread so virally is testament to the process of people believing what they would like to be true (and circulating such information within sympathetic echo chambers of like-minded social media friends). However, a more puzzling story is the fake news epicentre that was uncovered in the Macedonian town of Veles where approximately 100 pro-Trump sites were registered and operated. It is hard to think of this as a coincidence and it certainly highlights the valuable nexus between fake news and the profit motive. According to a report in *Wired* magazine, 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 (Subramanian, 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 Facebook advertising with the clear aim of promoting false election stories and targetting 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).

Fake news is created for a variety of reasons; some are purely commercial – for the clicks – and others are highly political – for 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 is conquering the world*, James Ball (2017) reflects upon a wider conception of fake news. There is 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 public acts of self-belief in his own rhetoric. "Trump's versatility in generating half-truth, untruth and outright spectacular mendacity borders on genius" (Ball, 2017).

Ball invokes a non-academic term to describe the easily spoken untruths now routinely part of political discourse (the word ‘bullshit’ is 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 likely ‘narrative’ that will be constructed around it. ‘Bullshit’ 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 normalised through unchallenged repetition. It is here that a political economy explanation of fake news comes into its own as a useful counterpoint to the liberal normative approach typical of much media studies. The latter approach is evident in Brian McNair’s recent work *Fake news: falsehood, fabrication and fantasy in journalism* (McNair, 2018).

The commercial motive behind journalism is to make money by selling the news commodity. 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 Fuchs and others have demonstrated, the audience as commodity is still a key category in the political economy of communication (2012). In the digital mediasphere this commodification takes two forms: firstly, the simple aggregation of eyeballs that involves the audience in the active ‘work’ of viewing content; and secondly, the category of audience labour that actually creates content which is then appropriated by media capital without payment.

Both types of labour are essential to the circulation, commodification and valorisation 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 organisations to establish and monetise web content for a small capital investment. The ease with which algorithmic bots can be established to mimic human social media accounts creates a low-cost and effective means to disseminate informational virally, whether it is reliable or not. Once bots have initiated a release of information, this can be easily amplified through friend networks. When this occurs, it is not easy to detect bot account origins (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 the subject of scrutiny. While I am not prepared to blame these companies for the spread of fake news, it is clear that they are now giants in the communication game and are largely determining the contours of the digital public sphere. It is thus important for political economists to continue the work pioneered by Christian Fuchs into the financialisation 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 commodifiable batches that are on-sold to content distributors. They, in turn, 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 – by using algorithms with the ability to mimic human natural language on social media. As Joanna Burkhardt notes in a moment of bleak humour: the “bot is not interested in the truth of falsehood of the information itself” (2017: 15).

A further factor that links fake news to the digital news industry is the use of provocative and often misleading ‘clickbait’ headlines. They often feature a sensational claim, which is not always backed up in the article. Globally, the Daily Mail brand is notorious for such headlines which can stretch across three or four decks. 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 usually do so only after reading the headline. Rarely, it seems, do we check the whole story before clicking ‘like’, or ‘send’.

The blurring of advertising and editorial provides another incentive for the purveyors of fake news. Popular sites are rewarded with a larger share of the online advertising pie, and this encourages them to push the same types of popular content. By injecting themselves into this already compromised space, the purveyors of fake news can monetize their content and hide it among sensational stories. To some extent, this shows how fake news relies on the psychological attraction toward spectacle and sensation.

Social media as such lends itself to the manifestation of false information as truth due to several in-built technological and social factors.

- **Speed:** One of the most compelling attractions of social media. 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 the 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 prevails over being right and accurate in the practices of digital journalism.
- **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.
- **Monetizing the clickstream:** We have moved well beyond the first blush and thrill of our initial relationship with digital media. Social media is now a quotidian life. Online display advertising and click rate accounting models routinely encourage publishers to create large audiences for low-cost articles with controversial headlines and outrageous claims.

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 less 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, the news hole is also filled with commercial ‘native advertising’ that masquerades as news copy. Mainstream outlets benefit from such advertising and the passing off of paid content as news-like information.

The lack of attention to detail in the preparation of news reduces standards of accuracy and fact-checking, and the cynicism of the audience increases with every mistake that is exposed. This leads to a further erosion of trust among those readers and viewers seeking an authentic news experience. The real fakers then benefit because when cynicism pervades the audience, fabrications become

almost indistinguishable from real news. Consequently, the audience begins to care even less. This creates the psychological effect that Hannah Arendt (1951: viii) describes so well in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*; when authoritarian leaders can engender deep cynicism among the public, their lies and brutalities are less likely to be challenged. As Arendt put it in the Preface to the first edition; there is a “curious contradiction” between the “avowed cynical ‘realism’” of totalitarian politics and its “conspicuous disdain” for reality itself. These are the conditions that generate cynicism and passivity on the part of citizens.

Fake news through an historical lens

As suggested in this commentary, two overlapping crises afflict modern mainstream journalism. There is a crisis of trust in traditional news sources, which 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, a little over half of American voters said that they trusted 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. The crisis in media profitability and the failure of the audience-commodity advertising model to cover rising production costs is the second structural driver of fake news. There has been a steady rise in the amount of non-news content shoehorned into a news-like templates and formats across the websites of major news organisations. 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).

Aside from these contemporary developments, fake news existed long before Donald Trump claimed to have invented the term in 2017. One of my favourite examples is an early Eighteenth Century news report of dragons in the English county of Wessex. No doubt the idea of dragons would be terrifying to people in the next county, and they were unlikely to venture out to see for themselves. Hoaxes have also been an integral part of the news landscape for at least 200 years, and take in everything from supposed landings on the moon in 1835 to Orson Welles’ radio broadcast of HG Wells’ novel *War of the Worlds* a century later in 1938. These are amusing hoaxes, designed to entertain rather than convince. Satirical news programs have 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 Randolph Hearst during the Spain-US 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 harbour to create a pretext for war. Hearst’s newspapers claimed that a Spanish bomb had been planted on the USS Maine, but there has never been any evidence to counter the accepted view that the explosion was an unfortunate accident in the ship’s ammunition lockers (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.

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 fake news categories within the scholarship of journalism and communication studies.

As indicated, the issue of fake news goes beyond the simple politico-cultural frame which shapes our view of the Trump presidency. 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, such as the researchers at Trend Micro, have a limited take on the subject:

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 operationalised in the Trend Micro report from which it is taken. In short, the report argues that fake news is the commercial weaponisation 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 an ahistorical definition, which is unsuited to a wider discussion. 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 the latter context, 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 which “could be misunderstood as factual when viewed in isolation”, particularly through a social media lens (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017: 213).
- News-like content that is advertorial and commercial in that it is selling a service or product.
- Fake news used in political discourse as an accusation against information being promoted by your opponents. Fake news’ is deployed as a pejorative term for any item of news that you disagree with, or that paints your cause, position, candidate, leader, or president in an unfavourable 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 your opponents for political or commercial advantage.
- Fake news that is highly ideological and misleading, but which informs popular idioms.

Critical political-economy helps to explain and contextualise each of these distinct categories. They are all derived from the contradictions of journalism as practised 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 categorically impossible in capitalist societies.

Conclusion

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 shows just how toxic the President has become to the body politic. His ongoing tirade of abuse towards American news media organisations, and his characterisation of them as ‘fake news’, is reason enough to take the issue seriously. However, there is a deeper, underlying concern: how did it come to this?

Only a critical political economy approach can adequately deal with the fact that capitalism relies on mass ignorance for its survival. The role of ideology is to normalise this ignorance through the “manufacture of consent” (Herman and Chomsky, 1988), a process largely based on false representations concerning the reality of capitalism. Thus, manufactured consent is, necessarily, manufactured ignorance based on a series of lies. These must be believed if the underlying system is 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).

As Betancourt notes, there is a social dynamic of misinformation in play, which can be recognised as a key contradiction in the manufacture of consent. This misinformation process can eventually lead to the unmasking of the lies at the core of pro-capitalist ideology.

However, as shown by Trump’s deployment of the fake news trope, the lies are effective for periods of time, particularly when repeated in a directed way at an audience pre-conditioned to be receptive. In this context, lies 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 disengagement it engenders to mask the undemocratic and anti-worker agenda of his ‘Make America Great Again’ project. It is important to criticise both the project and Trump’s use of the fake news trope which defends it.

I have argued here that while constant chants of fake news from the Trump White House are real and important – in that they can lead to a de-activation of citizenship – there are other categories of fake news worth investigating. Importantly there are economic factors in play which generate a market for

fake news. These include the Russian and Chinese ‘dark net’ services that provide automated promotional social media activities on a commercial basis (Gu, Kropotov and Yarchkin, 2017), as well as the commercial activities of Facebook and Google.

I have also warned against an over-emphasis on Trump, and the alleged Russian interference in western politics via fake news, without a critical understanding of how fake news is manifest in fake narratives that underpin the manufacture of consent.

Further investigation of fake news, from a political economy of communication perspective, is necessary to combat cynical disengagement by the citizenry in the public sphere. Now is the time for progressives to actively encourage marginalised and dispossessed citizens to participate in politics and communicative actions. Deepening their understanding of fake news is a precursor to establishing effective strategies to prevent its corrosive impacts on the public sphere.

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