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# A Political Science Perspective on Fake News

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## Abstract

Contemporary concerns about 'fake news' are typically framed around the need for factual accuracy, accountability and transparency in public life at both national and international levels. These are long-standing concerns within political science but the problem of 'fake news' and its associated impact on the fundamental political questions about who governs and how have taken on new potency in the digital age. In this chapter, we begin by considering what is meant by fake news before examining the issue in historical political context. The chapter then turns to more recent manifestations of fake news and the real-world challenges it presents. A final section considers how fake news has attracted interest in the study of elections and voting behaviour, international relations and strategic narratives, and transparency and trust in government.

Keywords: Fake News, Political Science, International Relations, Elections, Transparency

## Introduction

Access to information about the activities and decisions of rulers by those being ruled is generally believed to be an important underlying condition for the functioning and continued legitimacy of virtually all systems of government. In theory at least, governments govern with the continued consent of the people who have, by a variety of means, appointed them to office, and that once in office, those people require information about what actions are being taken on their behalf. Governments are also expected to inform citizens about what is happening in the world beyond national borders.

In the case of liberal western democracy, there is an expectation (with roots tracing to 5th century Athenian democracy) that citizens cannot leave it to governments alone to provide this information but rather they have a duty 'to learn about the social and political world, exchange information and opinions with fellow citizens and arrive at considered judgements about public affairs' (Chadwick et al. 2018:3). In this endeavour, the popular media have, since the late 18th century, had a vital role to play. It was in this century that the British parliament led the way in allowing newspaper writers access to their proceeding so as to inform the public of their deliberations. Referring to them as the 'fourth estate' (after the concept of parliament consisting of three estates representing the clergy, nobility and commoners), Irish parliamentarian and philosopher Edmund Burke recognised that parliamentary reporters were an increasingly powerful group in determining the success or otherwise of the government's political agenda, as well as that of their opponents.

Over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries, the means and methods of gathering access to information about political and public affairs nationally - and internationally - grew steadily. Central to this was evolution in the range of print, radio and subsequently television-based media, facilitated by new means of communicating across the globe and ever-greater access to the workings of public institutions and politicians themselves. And as is well established, the dawn of the digital and online age has resulted in a huge proliferation of information from a variety of state and non-state sources. The term 'fifth estate' has been coined to describe the emergence of online only news journalism and popular commentary.

However, any belief that increased access to greater amounts of information would bolster democratic accountability and transparency, and the social contract between rulers and the ruled, has been undermined by the phenomenon which has become loosely known as 'fake news'. An important moment for the idea of fake news was the 2016 US presidential election, when the term entered the popular lexicon as it was used extensively by Republican

candidate Donald Trump to portray news that was not politically supportive as being factually incorrect or inaccurate. Indeed, he went as far as to identify certain media outlets as 'the true enemy of the people' (Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2019: 7). As a result of this, the term 'fake news' has itself become the subject of official and political contestation, perhaps best captured by it being revealed as the Collins Dictionary word of the year in 2017.

A general interpretation of fake news is 'fictitious accounts made to look like news reports' (Edson et al. 2018: 138) but there is now greater acceptance that what is meant by fake news encompasses a wide range of activities. Chadwick et al suggest that fake news can range from the 'outright fabrications created by online news "factories" that exploit advertising syndication systems for financial gain' to 'online production and circulation of information that is exaggerated, sensationalized, selective, or assembled from a web of partial truths in hybrid networks of reputable and less reputable sources' (Chadwick et al, 2018: 6). The term has also experienced misuse and contradictory use – at times it has been ascribed to factual sources of information or even opinion pieces.

There are other, competing, definitions of fake news which seek to explain several different varieties of *disinformation* and *misinformation*. This distinction between 'disinformation' and 'misinformation' is an important one. Wardle proposes that disinformation can be understood as 'the deliberate creation and sharing of information known to be false', whereas misinformation is the 'the inadvertent sharing of false information' (Wardle 2017). A British parliamentary committee inquiry published in 2019 asserted that 'definitions in this field matter' (Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2019: 7), and after their preliminary research concluded, they resolved to change the name of this inquiry from simply 'Fake News' to 'Fake News and Disinformation'. The committee defined fake news not only according to its characteristics, but also its purpose, describing it as being, 'created for profit or other gain, disseminated through state-sponsored programmes, or spread through the deliberate distortion of facts, by groups with a particular agenda, including the desire to affect political elections'(Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee 2018: 3).

Edson et al. (2018) created a typology based on an examination of 34 articles which made use of the term between 2003-2017, drawing attention to the fact that the term has an older lineage than is often perceived. They identified six types of fake news: news satire, news parody, fabrication, manipulation, advertising and propaganda. News satire can be

understood as mock news programs which make use of humour and exaggeration to present audiences with news updates. News parodies differ from satire in that it uses non-factual information 'to inject humour' (2018: 142). Fabrication, 'refers to articles which have no factual basis but are published in the style of news articles to create legitimacy' (2018: 143). Manipulation refers to, 'the manipulation of real images or videos to create a false narrative' (2018: 144). Native advertising is when, 'news may function as fulfilling both advertising and news goals' (2018: 146). Finally, propaganda refers to, 'news stories which are created by a political entity to influence public perceptions' (2018: 146).

They cluster these types of fake news by facticity and intention. Facticity can be understood as, 'the degree to which fake news relies on facts' whereas intention is the, 'degree to which the creator of fake news intends to mislead' (Edson et al. 2018: 147). Native advertising and propaganda have both a high level of facticity and intention to deceive. Manipulation and fabrication have a low level of facticity and a high intention to deceive. News satire has a high level of facticity and a low intention to deceive. News parody has a low level of facticity and a low intention to deceive. Combined, they demonstrate the range of interpretations which may be applied to the concept of fake news.

As will be detailed below, the presentation of fictitious accounts as factual ones has a long pedigree in public affairs.  However, the proliferation in household access to the internet since the turn of the century, the existence of online versions of legacy media sources, and exponential growth in social media platforms and users presents challenges that are unprecedented in human development and political life.  The role of fake news and social media 'echo-chambers' (Sunstein, 2001: 3), in which citizens only consume and share information that confirms to their worldview, has even been compared to an infectious disease (Kuchari 2016). It has also given rise to the philosophical concept of a 'post-truth' age in which what were previously deemed to be accepted norms of scientific inquiry are questioned, and non-scientific assertions (often based on emotion) are treated as of equal value to scientific findings.

In 2017 the world's online population grew to 3.8 billion people (Domos 2018: 2), effectively half of the world's population collectively consuming and exchanging enormous amounts of information.  These developments have resulted in increased ease of access for the public to information and news. Much of this concerns politics and public affairs and includes information that is politically sensitive and significant. It also includes news which may be,

intentionally or otherwise, factually incorrect. The civic and democratic implications of this are evident when one considers that social media giant Facebook claimed 2 billion followers, or roughly the same as the world's population of Christians. Simialrly, over 1.8 billion people use YouTube, an equivalent figure to the followers of Islam (Harris 2018: 4).

A review by an EU commissioned expert group published in 2018 preferred the term 'disinformation' and recommended clear and unequivocal abandonment of using 'fake news'. The group argued that fake news did not adequately capture what is a complex range of print or digital information, some or all of which might not be factual, as well as the fact that the term is used in a partisan manner to dismiss arguments by perceived political opponents (Buning et al 2018: 10). While this is a valid appeal, for the purposes of inquiry and coherence, this chapter will use the term fake news throughout. In the next section, we consider more closely the origins and evolution of the concept before looking at its consequences for the practice and study of politics.

## The Origins of Fake News

Edson et al. question the idea of fake news as a modern problem facing society, pointing out that 'misinformation in the media is not new' (2018: 138). Even ancient civilizations, with their formative writing systems, employed a mix of what Marcus refers to as 'horizontal' and 'vertical' propaganda (Marcus 1992). Horizontal propaganda can be understood as propaganda used by 'members of the elite in an attempt to influence other members of the elite'. In contrast, vertical propaganda describes how 'rulers attempt to influence the behaviour of the ruled' (Marcus 1992: 437). Although fake news connotates malign endeavours, the more benign and ancient literary canon of political satire is based upon inaccurate representations of politicians and political views.

What is widely perceived to the first written history, Greek writer Herodotus's *Histories* (his account of the 5th century Persian Wars) has long been recognised as riddled with inaccuracies and fantastical claims. More recently, the post-WWII Cold War involved an extensive proxy propaganda war, with the spread of inaccurate information used by all parties to delegitimise then dominant global political ideologies. Authoritarian and dictatorial regimes have in many respects always been characterised by the use of fake news to reinforce particular values, demonise outsiders, and secure the authority of their leaderships.

A much more contemporary historical and ongoing example of 'fake news' can be seen in the form of 'tabloid journalism.' This can be understood as journalism primarily comprised of

sensationalised and subjective news stories, often involving openly partial political opinions and commentary. 'New Tabloid Journalism' in the UK can be traced back to the 1930s rebirth of the Daily Mirror which challenged the 'journalistic norm of objectivity' (Bromley 2003: 123). In the US a tabloid press emerged in the late 1890s, being pejoratively described as 'yellow journalism'. As with the tabloid press, yellow journalism can similarly be understood as mass produced newspapers which adopted 'varying proportions of sensationalism, populism, and socialism to address the interests of new, urban, working-class, and immigrant readers' (Campbell 2017: 1).

Many point to the tabloid presses' exploitation of social media to be the most prevalent and politically impactful source of viral disinformation and misinformation. Of course, that it might provide a fertile ground for fake news may not be unexpected given that for some the stock in trade of the tabloid press has always been news of questionable civic value. And so the idea that 'fake news' represents a digitization of the tabloid press has wide appeal. Chadwick et al. contend that there are 'affinities between tabloid news and misinformation and disinformation behaviours on social media' and that 'sharing tabloid news on social media is a significant predictor of democratically-dysfunctional misinformation and disinformation behaviours' (Chadwick et al. 2018: 1). However, fake news in its modern form goes beyond simply digitalisation of pre-existing forms of sensationalism and questionable assertions.

## Fake News in the 21st Century

As has been established, the contemporary idea of fake news is not new. Rather, what is new is the environment which fake news now exists in – an increasingly interconnected and digitized world with advanced information communication technologies. Fake news may be distinguished from traditional vertical and horizontal political propaganda in that it is not always elite led. Indeed, in contrast to these concepts, fake news can be disinformation which is produced by and/or circulated by members of the general public and non-state organisations, as well as by political elites. And it can be rapidly spread and legitimised by political elites and popular figures at a low cost.

As we enter the third decade of the 21st century, fake news (however defined) is generally believed to represent a fundamental challenge to liberal representative democracies globally and has become a subject which political institutions around the world have sought to address (Chadwick et al, 2018: 147). Reflecting the need for international cooperation on this, the UK Parliament's Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee conducted an inquiry into fake

news, and also established a 'Grand International Committee' in 2018, involving parliamentary representatives from Argentina, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, France, Ireland, Latvia and Singapore to examine the democratic challenge presented by fake news and disinformation. The increased choice in media has resulted in an environment, according to the Committee inquiry, where users are only presented with material, 'that reinforces their views, no matter how distorted or inaccurate while dismissing content they do not agree with as fake news' (2019: 5). They further proposed that the potential ramifications in terms of accountability, transparency and democratic government are evident as this, 'has a polarising effect and reduces the common ground on which reasoned debate, based on objective facts, can take place'(Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee 2019: 5).

An important problem identified by the Committee in the attempts to tackle fake news, by legislation or other means, is the issue of press freedom. It has long been argued that new media sources are not held to the same professional and ethical journalistic standards as more traditional news sources. Edson et al contend that 'most legacy news media are committed to truth and draw the line at altering images to create a misleading or inauthentic narrative' (2018: 144), and contrast this with extensive manipulation of images and interpretations on social media.

The continued use of fake news through the term of office held by US President Donald Trump and the suggestion that the media were the enemy of the people stand in stark contrast to more typical and historical views of political elites on the press. It has long been a convention that press freedom is an integral part of liberal representative democracy. In a much-quoted speech British Prime Minister Winston Churchill remarked that:

> A free press is the unsleeping guardian of every other right that free men prize; it is the most dangerous foe of tyranny … Under dictatorship the press is bound to languish … But where free institutions are indigenous to the soil and men have the habit of liberty, the press will continue to be the Fourth Estate, the vigilant guardian of the rights of the ordinary citizen' (Churchill, 1949).

The popularisation of fake news challenges this ideal as individuals and groups may apply the label to undermine information and commentary that is factual or legitimate. In another interpretation, it raises the 'plausible risk of the substitution of the Fifth Estate for the Fourth Estate [and] the potential for audiences to be more selectively exposed to the news' (Newman et al. 2012: 7). This presents a challenge to the effective functioning of democratic

accountability and transparency regimes as this 'news' is 'unmediated by editors and professional journalists, in ways that could lead also to less diversity and the reinforcement of prejudices' (Newman et al, 2012: 7). These concerns may be overstated. In a review of the French and Italian cases, Fletcher et al (2018) found that websites presenting fake news were far less engaged with than the websites of established news sites.

Traditional media sources such as TV, radio and print are considered as 'central to pluralist democratic processes' (Dutton 2009:1). Online media also offers an opportunity to enhance civic engagement, communication between those holding public office and the public, and by virtue of this access to information the democratic quality of government. Indeed, the potential of social media to share political news, information and opinion was initially touted to be an, 'essential raw material for good citizenship' (Chadwick et al. 2018: 1). This however premised on the assumption that increased interconnectivity and exposure to social media would result in citizens being exposed to a plurality of alternative perspectives and reasoned, valid and well-informed opinions. In practice, however, the proliferation of new media presents a substantial challenge for democracy because access to digital technologies and social media has brought with it a corresponding proliferation in dissemination of disinformation and misinformation.

Elaborating on the idea of echo chambers (above), Sunstein noted the ability of digital technology to increase people's ability to filter what they want to read, see and hear such that 'you need not come across topics that you have not sought out …you are able to see exactly what you want to see, no more, no less' (Sunstein, 2001: 3). Some social media platforms make use of user data to algorithmically tailor posts and content which appears on their newsfeed, so they only see what corresponds to their interests. This is often done automatically and invisibly – users typically must 'opt out' rather than 'opt in' to such a scheme. The effect of these activites on citizen preferences and voting behaviour is increasingly contested however (Dubois

 and Grant 2018).

The proliferation of fake news has also resulted in 'fact-checking' organisations and associated websites such as ClaimBuster and PolitiFact.com, with rating for the veracity of claims made by politicians and governments (Graves 2016). As of April 2020, one of the most popular websites – reporterslab.org – claimed there were 237 fact-checkers in nearly 80 countries. However, keeping up with the volume and speed of transmission of disinformation

and misinformation is a constant challenge with a large number of scientific papers suggesting ways and means of improving this (cf. Boididou et al. 2017, Fletcher et al. 2017; Ciampaglia 2018).

## Fake News and the study of politics

For political scientists, fake news has application across a wide variety of issues in government and politics, and the relationship between the citizen and the state. We consider here three sub-fields in political science where fake news has generated particular interest. These are elections and voting behaviour; international relations and strategic narratives; and transparency and trust in government.

That fake news has real world implications for democratic accountability and governance, and electoral politics, is now well established. Prominent examples of how fake news infused the democratic process include the 2016 US Presidential Election (when, as noted, the term also entered popular discourse), the 2016 Brexit referendum and associated campaign activities, and the UK General Elections of 2017 and 2019. There are however earlier examples of social media-based fake news being part of electoral competition. For example, research has also been conducted into the use of social media in the 2015 Argentine presidential election (Filer and Fredheim 2015) and also the 2012 US Presidential campaign (Kreiss 2014). The predispositions or otherwise of voters to endorse or reject political conspiracies and rumours has also attracted the attention of political scientists (Miller et al 2015)

Fake news has also been strongly connected to the emergence of what is termed 'populism', with the electoral success of individuals such as Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil (Bracho-Polanco 2019), Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines (Otto 2019), and Narendra Modi in India (Poonam and Bansal 2019) identified as prominent cases of populist leaders benefitting from incidences of fake news during their campaigns. Reflecting these developments, the UK parliamentary inquiry into fake news identified that 'data has been and is still being used extensively by private companies to target people, often in a political context, in order to influence their decisions' (Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2019: 56).

There are also geo-political power struggles at play, and the Russian Federation in particular has been implicated to this use of fake news via various digital channels to influence the outcome of popular votes. The inquiry by the UK's Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee found that Russia supports, 'organisations that create and disseminate disinformation, false and hyper-partisan content, with the purpose of undermining public confidence and of destabilising democratic states' (Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2018: 43). In 2020, the United States Senate published a report confirming that the Russian Government used fake social media accounts and bots to interfere in the 2016 US Presidential election (Select Committee on Intelligence 2019). It proposed that this was done with the objective of boosting the candidacy of Donald Trump and harming the electoral prospects of Hilary Clinton.

Because of this, fake news is not only of interest to students of elections and voting behaviour, but also of increasing interest to scholars of international relations and strategic narratives. Strategic narratives are those tools used by political actors to articulate a position on a specific issue and to shape perceptions and actions of domestic and international audiences (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle 2014). For example, Khaldarova and Pantti (2016) examined how the transmission of strategic narratives and counter-narratives through television and fact-checking websites respectively by the parties to the Russian-Ukraine conflict over Crimea was used to appeal to popular emotions and infuse reality with fiction. In South Korea, the need for government to manage potentially damaging 'cyber-rumours' necessitates internet surveillance systems to try and mitigate this (Kwon and Rao 2017).

The third and final area where we see interest amongst political scientists in the effects of fake news is in respect of transparency and trust in government. The UK Brexit campaign was heavily influenced by disinformation. In the lead-in to the referendum, many right-wing tabloid newspapers strongly advocated for Britain's exit from the European Union and their online work was an important part of their strategy. For instance, *The Express* ran a story that a leaked document from the European Union indicated that they intended to force the privatization of the NHS so as to remove an impediment to equal access to the European Single Market. Whilst this was a totally unfounded the story it, 'became the single most-shared news article on social media during the Brexit referendum campaign, with 464,000 shares, comments, and interactions on Facebook' (Chadwick et al, 2018: 7).

With the use and spread of rumours and unsubstantiated claims, many of which elicit rapid and voluminous responses, much research in political science (and political communications) has increasingly focused on whether or not online activity is undermining the integrity of the political process and citizen trust in government. In their analysis of the 2012 US Presidential election, Garret et al. (2016) found that exposure to ideological media encouraged inaccurate beliefs, regardless of what consumers knew of the evidence presented to them. Insights from psychology about individual's propensity to consume and believe fake news (Dagnall et al. 2015; De keersmaecker and Roets 2017; Miler et al. 2015), and the use of political attitude profiling by social media platforms to target political messaging (Dutton et al. 2017; Kreiss and Mcgregor 2019) have also emerged as topics of importance to political scientists. Kreiss and Mcgregor (2018) argue that such is their importance to political outcomes, scholars of political communication need to consider such firms as active rather than passive agents in the political process.

## Conclusion

The existence and use of what might be termed fake news is not necessarily a new or novel phenomenon for political science. Rather, what is new is the environment in which it is disseminated. In this interpretation, fake news represents traditional forms of disinformation adapting to modern technologies and social media platforms. It is effectively a popular and catch-all term encompassing propaganda, misinformation, disinformation and subjective journalism as they present in the digital age.

The availability of social media and the internet offer extensive opportunities for individuals to easily access unprecedented amounts of information about the institutions of national and global governance and those in power. However, it also facilitates the rapid dissemination of information that is factually incorrect or mischievous. This can be damaging when this false information is political in nature, undermining public trust in institutions and political figures, influencing voting behaviour and the outcomes of elections. This problem has been compounded by the increasing commercialization of social media which has incentivized the production of fake news.

How democracies in particular respond to the challenges posed by fake news, disinformation and misinformation is an evolving process. At time of writing, the focus is on getting gargantuan social media and technology companies to adhere to rules allowing citizens more

control over their personal data and its use. There is also a need to more easily identify the sources and veracity of information and scrutinize the financial activities and operations of technology companies, many of whose funding models are based on facilitating the rapid spread of unchecked information. In addressing the problems associated with the fake news phenomenon, political scientists have a distinctive role to play in helping to better understanding the consequences of fake news on voting behaviour and electoral outcomes, inter-state relations and trust in the institutions of government.

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